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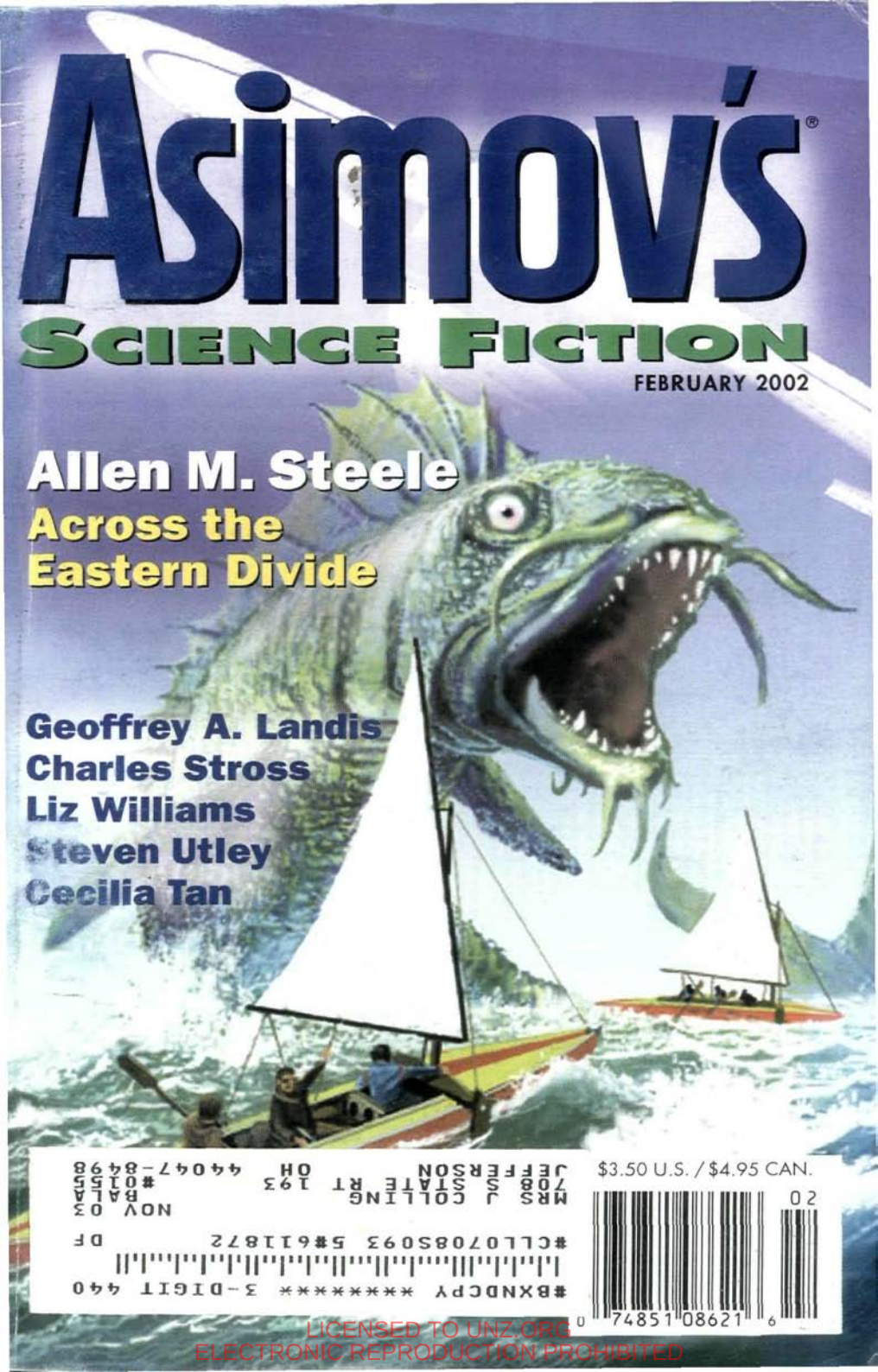

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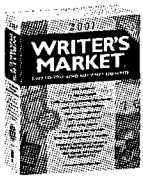

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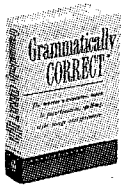

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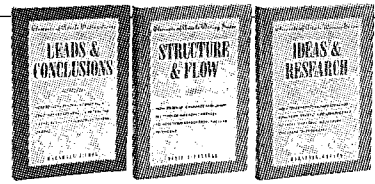

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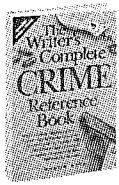

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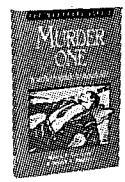

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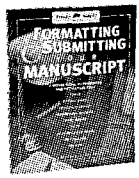

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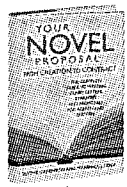

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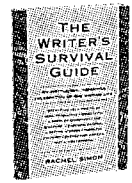

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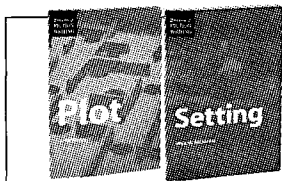

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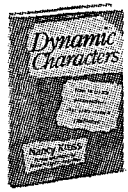

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THE FINAL VOYAGE OF ODYSSEUS

"The eternal silence of these infinite spaces terrifies me," Blaise Pascal noted in his *Pensées,* that extraordinary jumble of philosophical jottings that the seventeenth-century French philosopher set down toward the close of his life. The startling phrase leaps up suddenly at the reader just a few lines below the equally famous passage in which Pascal declares, "A human being is only a reed, the weakest in nature, but he is a thinking reed. To crush him, the whole universe does not have to arm itself. A mist, a drop of water, is enough to kill him. But if the universe were to crush the reed, the man would be nobler than his killer, since he knows that he is dying, and that the universe has the advantage over him. The universe knows nothing about him." And then, a sudden, jarring leap to the next level of response, as powerful as it is unexpected, that stunning line:

The eternal silence of these infinite spaces terrifies me.

I've been thinking about those infinite spaces, and their terrifying eternal silences, quite a bit since the death last year of Poul Anderson. Poul was the poet of the spaceways. More than anyone else in modern science fiction, he made us feel the immensity of space, the darkness of it, the silence, and, yes, the terror of which Pascal spoke three and a half centuries ago. From such early works as *The Snows of Ganymede* and *No World of Their Own* on through *Tau Zero* and "Call Me Joe" to the most recent of his innumerable novels and stories, he [illegible] us the strangeness and awesomeness of the universe in a way that was at once exhilarating and sobering.

The danger is, in science fiction, that we get too chummy with the universe. We reduce it in our stories to something that is quickly comprehensible and readily traversible, and allow our spacefarers to pop back and forth through its billions of light-years and its myriad of galaxies with the same sort of ease with which I might travel from San Francisco to Chicago tomorrow in the course of a single afternoon. It's a convenient way of storytelling, yes. But its big fault is that it allows everything to get *much* too easy. I remember myself as a boy of fifteen, who had already read more science fiction than was good for him, aiming a flashlight into the blackness of a summer night in Massachusetts and thinking that the beam of my little light must inevitably travel on and on forever, reaching outward into the galaxy at a rate of 186,000 miles per second until it came to Betelgeuse or Rigel or Aldebaran. Well, no: the atmosphere of Earth was in the way, and that flashlight beam probably managed no more than the first few hundred yards of the journey to the stars. But at that moment I saw no reason why I could not send messages to the peoples of the far galaxies with it. I knew what a light-year was; I knew how far away those galaxies are. Yet I had come away from my extensive reading of science fiction, somehow, with a sense not of the hugeness of the

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ty. And so I innocently tried to send semaphore signals to the natives of Procyon XIX with my two-dollar tin flashlight.

Even our best writers are guilty of making the cosmos seem an excessively cozy place. Consider Isaac Asimov's famous Foundation series, in which the inhabitants of the *twenty-five million inhabited worlds* of the Galactic Empire zip merrily about from planet to planet, going from Trantor to Siwenna to Terminus ever so much more easily than a citizen of Rome could have gone from Naples to Alexandria. The Foundation novels are charming and delightful books, and science fiction readers will cherish them to the end of time, but their great flaw is that they reduce interstellar travel to the level of a trip on the New York subway system. (Isaac didn't like to fly, and rarely went very far from New York City.) Frank Herbert's Dune books, though set in a very different sort of stellar empire, nevertheless have the same inescapable flaw. All galactic-empire stories do. They are inherently reductive in nature. They turn whole clusters of stars into downscaled metaphors that make them seem to be nothing more than aggregations of counties and towns, and they make the gigantic dark emptinesses between the galaxies seem like the grassy patches of scruffy wasteland that separate the suburbs of one medium-sized city from the suburbs of the next.

That is, I suppose, the only way such books can be written. Without easy faster-than-light travel that carries with it no great relativistic consequences there can be no galactic-empire novels; but once you let those nifty warp-speed spacedrives into the story, the true wonder and terror that comes from contemplating the hugeness of the cosmos must inevitably leak away. Poul Ander-

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son, of course, wrote as many faster-than-light tales as anybody. But he did, more often than not, see space travel as something qualitatively different from a commuter jaunt, and there are passages in his best books in which his characters, confronting the universe in all its grandeur, are humbled by that grandeur and communicate that humility to us.

One great character of literature who never let humility stand in his way, and yet who surely stared outward into the unfathomable universe with the same mixture of awe and hungry fascination that Poul Anderson showed us so often, was Odysseus, King of Ithaca. He was the prototypical explorer, burning with the need to look upon the mysteries that lie beyond the horizon.

Homer's immortal epic poem traces Odysseus's ten-year-long journey homeward from the Trojan War, taking him from island to island around the Mediterranean in a way that demonstrates that the insatiably curious Odysseus was not in as much of a hurry to get home as many of us, under the same circumstances, would have been. He wanted to see and experience everything that lay in his path, and did. (SF writers have been rewriting *The Odyssey* ever since. Fletcher Pratt did it fifty years ago in a fine novella called "The Wanderer's Return"; Philip José Farmer's *The Green Odyssey* appeared a few years later; and more recently we have had, among many others, the *Star Trek: Voyager* series.)

Odysseus made one last voyage after his return from Troy. Homer doesn't tell us about it, but Dante does, in the twenty-sixth canto of *The Inferno,* and it's a wonderful story, which I'm sure Poul Anderson must have known. It shows Odysseus ("Ulysses," Dante calls him, using the Latin form) as a perfect Andersonian voyager, awed but in no way cowed by the unattainability of the unconquered worlds that lie before him.

It is a story that Dante apparently invented, since there seems to be no Greek or Roman antecedent for it. Dante, recounting his journey through Hell, is deep in the Eighth Circle now, among the "Fraudulent Counselors," those who had injured others through trickery. Cunning Odysseus has been sent to Hell for devising the Trojan horse, by which Troy finally was conquered. To Dante the shade of Odysseus tells a tale, not the familiar one of his journey home to Ithaca, but of what happened afterward, when, driven by "the restless itch to rove," he felt impelled to leave his beloved wife and his aged father and his son and set forth once more, "on the deep and open sea, with a single ship and that little band of comrades who even then had not deserted me."

Off they go on a final Odyssey, westward into the Mediterranean, with Africa on their left and the coast of Spain on their right, until they find themselves staring at the open sea, the uncharted Atlantic. "Brothers," Odysseus says, "you who have passed through a hundred thousand perils to reach this place, do not deny yourself this last exploit. Here lies a chance to learn for yourself what lies in this unknown world on the far side of the sun, where no people dwell." He tells his men that they had not been born to live in brutish ignorance, but for the pursuit of knowledge and excellence: and so they put their shoulders to their oars and eagerly go forward into the unplumbed ocean that stands before them.

The path Odysseus takes goes toward the southwest. On and on they go, presumably toward the place we now know as Brazil. Soon they pass the Equator; the familiar northern stars slip below the horizon, and

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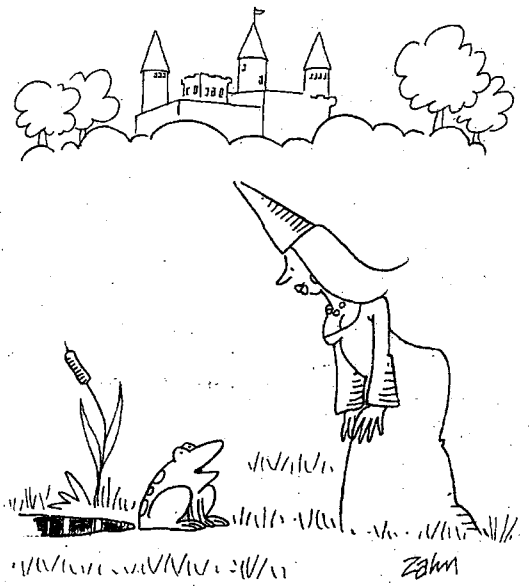
they sail beneath the unfamiliar constellations of the other hemisphere. At last a mountain looms before them in the sea, "dark in the distance," says Odysseus, "and so lofty and so steep, I had never seen its like before." It is, Dante will explain to us much later in his great poem, the mountain of Purgatory; but Odysseus has no knowledge of that. He and his crew rejoice at the sight of land, and head vigorously toward it. But then a fierce storm comes toward them out of the newly discovered shore, and the voyagers' ship is caught by whirlwinds and spun three times around. The fourth spin is the fatal one: the stern rises, the prow sinks, and the sea closes over Odysseus and his men, for Odysseus must not reach Purgatory, but is destined to burn forever among his fellow tricksters in Hell's Eighth Circle.

The failure of Odysseus's final voyage is not important. What matters is that he made it: that he stood by the Pillars of Hercules, looking westward into the great ocean that no one before him had dared to enter, and, putting aside all terror and awe, urged his companions forward for the sake of the pursuit of knowledge and excellence.

A great dark ocean lies all about our world. Blaise Pascal looked up into it and shivered with primordial terror. I looked up into it once and aimed my flashlight at the inhabitants of the stars. Again and again Poul Anderson reminded us that venturing into that black void would be something quite different from taking the 9:15 train from Penn Station to Connecticut, something frightening and humbling, but that some of us—some—would attempt that voyage even so. ❍



"NOT ONLY AM I A PRINCE, I'M ALSO A HEART BEAT AWAY FROM THE MONARCHY."

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On the Net

James Patrick Kelly

MOVIES

sell out

Gardner and Sheila didn't exactly come out and say it, but the subtext was clear. When they asked me to take this gig, I understood that they were looking for a column that might lure new readers to this worthy magazine and help *Asimov's* hold on to its existing audience. Feature diversification is a strategy that other SF publications have pursued—with varying degrees of success. In fact, some pundits claim that the only way for a genre magazine to succeed in this difficult economic climate is to embrace all of those other media that compete with fiction for your hard-earned dollar and scarce leisure time. I guess this is supposed to widen the demographic by tricking folks who probably don't read all that much into buying short stories. Well, maybe—but you will note the obvious: *'Mov's* doesn't do games or comics and there is no gossip column devoted to SF on TV. You will scan the table of contents in vain for interviews (even of writers!) or for reviews of the latest movies. For the most part, it's just **Robert Silverberg** <*http://owmyhead.com/silveberg/*> and **me** <*http://www.jimkelly.net*> and our trio of astute book reviewers: **Norman Spinrad** <*http://ourworld.compuserve.com/hompages/normanspinrad/*>, **Peter Heck** <*http://www.sff.net/people/peter.heck/*> and **Paul DiFilippo** <*http://www.cambrianpubs.com/DiFilippo/*>. For myself, while I have occasionally touched on media SF, I have tried to concentrate on the written word. Not this time . . . you're reading the column in which JPK sells out. Let's talk movies, gang!

Except that I don't necessarily want to round up the usual suspects. For example, is there anything more we need to say about the films listed at **The Top Ten Science-Fiction Movies** <*http://topten-results.tripod.com/ScienceFictionMovies.html*>?

The site has them in this order: *Jurassic Park*, 1993, *Independence Day*, 1996, *Star Wars*, 1977/97, *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial*, 1982, *The Lost World: Jurassic Park*, 1997, *Men in Black*, 1997, *The Empire Strikes Back*, 1980/97, *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*, 1991, *Return of the Jedi*, 1983/97, *Batman*, 1989. According to the site: "Facts are authenticated by Russell Ash's *Top Ten of Everything 2000*." I'm not sure what criteria Mr. Ash used—or even that he has his facts straight—but at the very least, this is a plausible compilation of the ten most over-exposed science fiction movies of all time.

So let's move on, shall we? What I'd like to do instead is to take you on a tour of websites devoted to science fiction movies that meant a lot to me. While these will all be familiar to readers of a certain age, it never hurts to remind the young ones that George Lucas did not single-handedly invent the science fiction flick.

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magnificent seven

King Kong, made in 1933, is the oldest movie on my personal list, and possibly the cheesiest. And yet I am quite sure that my keen interest in dinosaurs was first hatched somewhere on Skull Island. You can visit the King at **Kong, The Eighth Wonder of the World** <*http://www.aboyd.com/kong/*>. Here you'll find screen shots and plot summaries and cast bios and the like, as well as a wealth of useless information like the fact that King Kong was eighteen feet tall when he lived in the jungle but twenty-four feet tall when he hit the streets of Manhattan or that the famous athlete, Jim Thorpe, was one of the native dancers on Skull Island.

As a kid, I was vaguely disappointed by *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, which was released in 1951, the year I was born. I saw it again and again on TV and couldn't believe that a movie that had a flying saucer and a killer robot wasted so much time on little Bobby's budding friendship with the spaceman Klaatu. I thought then the movie was too polite to humankind by half. Nonetheless, I will never, *ever* forget that I must say, "Klaatu barada nikto," if I ever meet Gort in a dark alley. **Dreamer's The Day The Earth Stood Still** <*http://www.dreamerwww.com/tdtess.htm*> is an excellent tribute site with all the good stuff you'd expect, along with the final dialogue/shooting script and an outline and treatment for a sequel written in 1981 by Ray Bradbury.

In 1956, a decade before Captain Kirk buckled on his phaser, Commander John J. Adams touched down on *Forbidden Planet* with his trusty blaster tucked into his belt. Yes, there was an away team consisting of a cocky second-in-command and a cerebral ship's doctor, but the real stars here were the setting, the planet of a doomed race called the Krell, and the plot, which was lifted from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. At **The Unofficial Forbidden Planet Home Page** <*http://sfstation.members.easyspace.com/fbhome.htm*> you can download the Krell truetype font, flip through black and white stills or listen to Robbie the Robot steal scenes from the meat actors.

When *2001: A Space Odyssey* was released in 1968, it seemed as if two men, Stanley Kubrick and Arthur C. Clarke, might actually wrench SF flicks off America's drive-in movie screens and into mainstream respectability. It didn't happen, of course, and while many consider this to be the greatest SF movie ever made, *2001* didn't have much influence on subsequent film-making, with the exception of its unnecessary and inferior sequel *2010*. If you are one of the many who were puzzled by the original, consider clicking **Kubrick 2001: The Space Odyssey explained** <*http://www.kubrick2001.com/2001.html*> a twenty minute synopsis/explanation animated in Macromedia's Flash and created by an outfit called New Media Giants. I must say that their take on the enigmatic ending is a tad too reductive for my taste. For a more traditional tribute site, try **2001: A Space Odyssey Internet Research Archive** <*http://www.palantir.net/2001/*> which features several excellent galleries of screen captures, an early version of the screenplay and a comprehensive links page.

1977 was a very, very good year for science fiction movies. Of the two blockbusters released then, the Lucas has subsequently overshadowed the Spielberg. In my opinion, however, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* was the best SF flick of that memorable year. It had a strong cast enacting believable characters, as-

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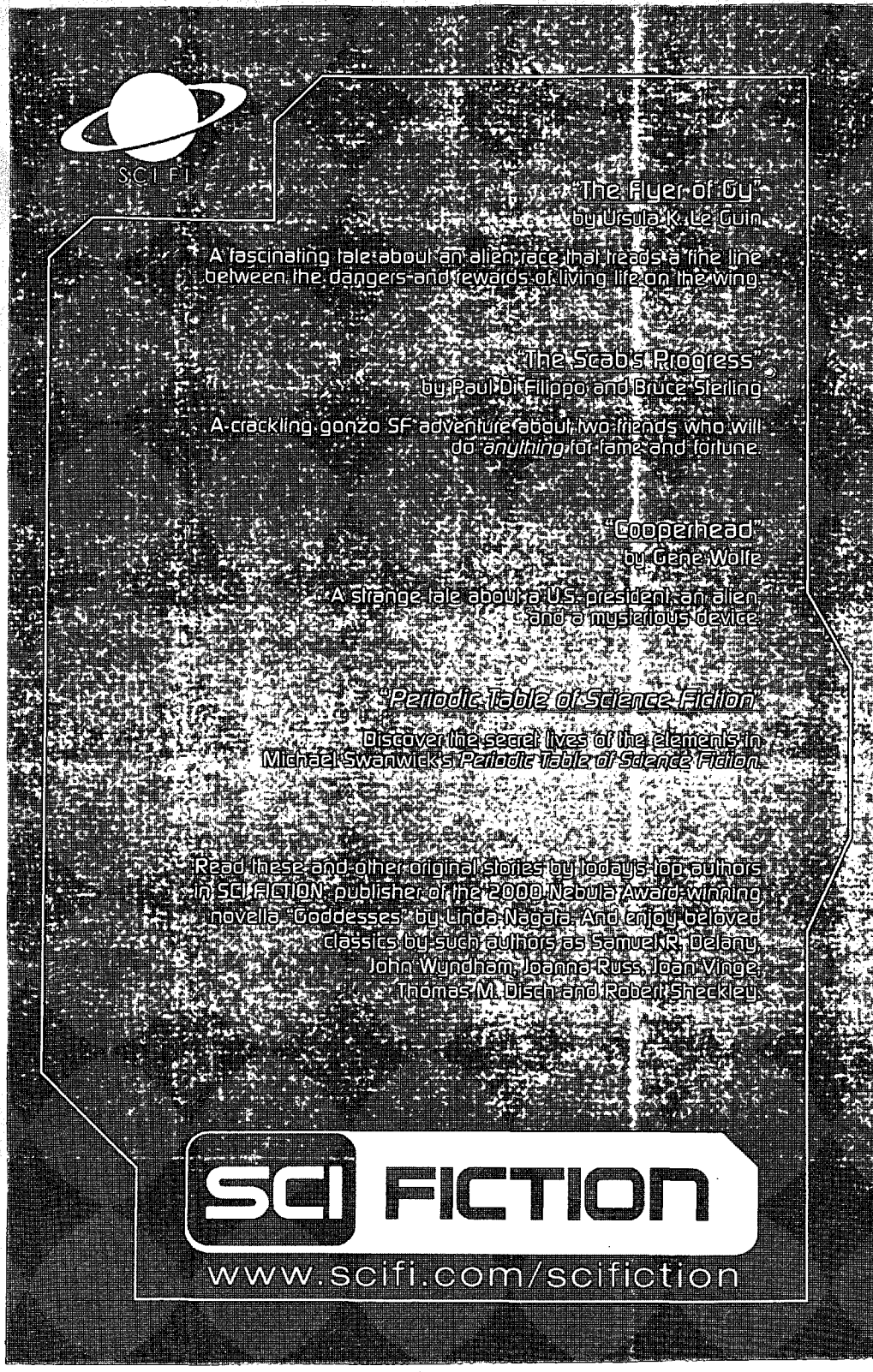
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tonishing special effects that are utterly lost on a TV screen, but most important, it tugs the viewer right through sense of wonder to a kind of cinematic transcendence that I don't believe has since been equaled. It is a sad comment on the public perception of this movie that I can't find any first rate tribute sites, but the modest **Close Encounters of the Third Kind Web Site** <*http://www.winternet.com/~tandj04/ce3k/ce3k.html*> will do in a pinch.

In 1979 I spent what may have been the scariest two hours of my life watching Ridley Scott's *Alien* on the biggest movie screen in the city of Boston, Massachusetts. For all its inspired mayhem, what still sticks with this particular science fiction practictioner is the background of the movie: the bizarre dead ship of the aliens and the gritty *Nostromo*, which looked more like a working factory than a spaceship. Of course, in 1979 I had no way of knowing that *Alien* would be followed by four (and perhaps five, if rumors are correct) increasingly unsatisfactory sequels, which have tended to draw attention away from the original. **The Alien Movies Resource** <*http://www.ucalgary.ca/~naflande/*> has a wide variety of all things *Alien*, including scripts and cut scenes, sound bites, trivia, and FAQs.

I don't think that the impact of *Blade Runner* on the cyberpunk writers can be overstated. William Gibson had really just begun his amazing run when it was released in 1982 and yet there was his *noir* future realized in all its grimy glory in a movie starring one of those *Star Wars* guys, *ferchrissakes*. Notwithstanding the fact that *Blade Runner* was a commercial disappointment, this movie and Gibson's *Neuromancer* validated the cyberpunks' literary agenda. Today *Blade Runner* is a movie with an extensive web presence, but a couple of good starting points for exploration are **The BladeZone: The Online Blade Runner Fan Club and Museum** <*http://www.bladezone.com/*> and **The Official Blade Runner On-Line Magazine** <*http://www.devo.com/bladerunner/index.html*>.

shorts

You will notice as you click these sites that some offer trailers or brief clips. In order to watch these mini-movies, you need a media player. The one that comes with Windows is **Windows Media** <*http://www.microsoft.com/windows/windowsmedia/en/default.asp*> currently in version 7.1 as I type this. Well worth adding to your hard disk is **RealPlayer 8 Basic** <*http://www.real.com/player/index.html*>, currently in Build 6.0.9. There is also a Plus version of RealPlayer that will cost you, but the free Basic is good enough, sez me. RealNetworks and Microsoft have been battling for dominance in internet media delivery, and although it seems likely that the Evil Empire will crush RealNetworks in the same way it crushed Netscape and its Navigator, at this point in time the issue has not yet been decided. In fact, I prefer RealPlayer and use it as my default for most media formats.

Watching video on your computer can be a frustrating experience and unless you have broadband or enjoy watching paint dry, I don't recommend it. Even if you have a fast connection, the picture you'll see will open in a window about as big as a baseball card or maybe, if you're lucky, a tad smaller than the cover of *Asimov's*. Resolutions range from melted ice cream to *where-the-heck-did-I leave-my-glasses*?

But video is coming, and its harbinger is the lively short film scene that has popped up on the web over

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the last couple of years. Probably the best-known of the current crop is the nine minute long ***George Lucas in Love*** *<http://www.mediatrip.com/film/movies_on_demand/308.html>*, a takeoff on *Shakespeare in Love* in which young George is inspired by a woman with an oddly familiar hair style to use characters from his "real" life to populate his latest film, an "agricultural space tragedy." Alas, all too many of the short SF films available for downloading are spoofs of full length theatrical releases, but there *is* interesting original work being done, particularly in computer animation. A good place to begin your sampling is **Movies @ Assistant Directors.com~~Short Films Online** *<http://assistantdirectors.com/Movies/OnlineShorts.shtml>* where you will find links to over a hundred sites that feature thousands of short films—many, many more than this reviewer had time to screen. I did spend some time at **Exposure: The Future of Film** *<http://www.scifi.com/exposure/exposure.html>*, part of Scifi.com. I can commend *Antebios* by French director Francois Baranger to your attention as well as *Shaft of Light* from Bill Tomlinson. On the other hand, I didn't much care for *9mm of Love* from Robert Duncan McNeill, and *Herd* by Mike Mitchell was only intermittently funny. **Ifilms** *<http://www.ifilm.com/>* has a worthy collection of short SF material. I quite enjoyed *Tales from Space* by Franco Zocalli and Alex Orelle's *Freeware* had its moments. However, only a stone Austin Powers fan would sit through *Toy Wars* by Dave Craven.

A word of warning to the timid: doing the research for this section crashed my computer maybe half a dozen times.

exit

It is only a matter of a few years, it says here, before the means of distribution of movies and television will have to be reinvented. In the same way that the mp3 standard has changed the music industry, predictable improvements in bandwidth as well as data compression and storage will kill off not only Blockbuster but your neighborhood mom and pop video rental stores. Count on renting *Alien Re-reincarnation The Next Generation Part X: A New Hope* from sequels.com by, say, 2007. Not long after, cable and broadcast television channels will get a very hard shake indeed. Will this usher in a golden age of independent film or result in a radical retrenchment of your entertainment options?

Don't know. Stay tuned. ❍

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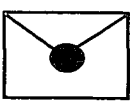

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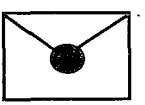

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Charles Stross has been described as a "new Scottish writer." He says one out of three ain't bad, since he *is* a writer who happens to live in Edinburgh. He adds that he "can be described as, if not new, then at least fresh." In his latest story of the near future in the information age, Mr. Stross shows us that who we are is not just a matter of what we know, it's the delivery system as well.

TOURIST

Charles Stross

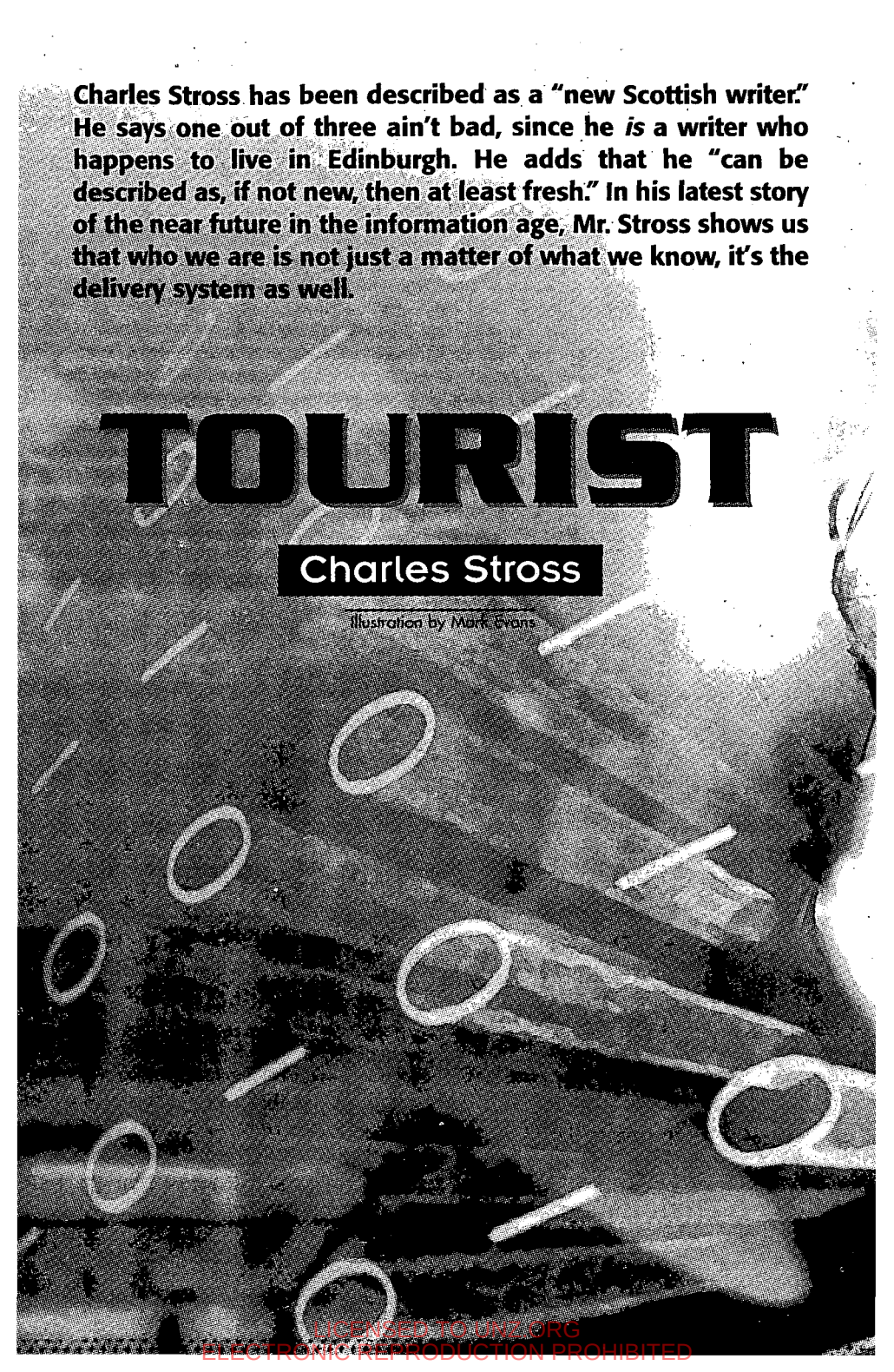

Illustration by Mark Evans

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Spring-Heeled Jack runs blind, blue fumes crackling from his heels: his right hand, outstretched for balance, clutches a mark's stolen memories. His victim is just sitting up on the hard stones of the pavement, wondering what's happened; maybe he looks after the fleeing youth, but the tourist crowds block the view, and, in any case, he has no hope of catching the mugger. Hit-and-run amnesia is what the polis call it, but to Spring-Heeled Jack, it's just more loot to buy fuel for his Russian army-surplus motorized combat boots.

The victim of the mugging sits on the cobblestones clutching his aching temples. *What happened?* he wonders. The universe is a brightly colored blur of fast-moving shapes, augmented by deafening noises. His glasses are rebooting continuously: they panic every eight hundred milliseconds, whenever they realize that they're alone on his personal area network without the comforting support of a memory hub to tell them where to send his incoming sensory feed. Two of his mobile phones are bickering moronically, disputing ownership of his grid bandwidth.

A tall blonde clutching an electric chainsaw sheathed in pink bubblewrap leans over him curiously. "You all right?" she asks.

"I—" he shakes his head, which hurts. "Who am I?" His medical monitor is alarmed because his blood pressure has fallen: his pulse is racing, and a host of other biometrics suggest that he's going into shock.

"I think you need an ambulance," the woman announces. She mutters at her lapel: "phone, call an ambulance." She waves a finger vaguely at the victim, then wanders off, chainsaw clutched under one arm, as if embarrassed at the idea of involving herself: typical southern émigré behavior in the Athens of the North. The man shakes his head again, eyes closed, as a flock of girls on powered blades skid around him in elaborate loops. A siren begins to warble, over the bridge to the north.

Who am I? wonders the man on the pavement. "I'm *Manfred,*" he says with a sense of stunned wonder. He looks up at the bronze statue of a man on a horse that looms above the crowds on this busy street corner. Someone has plastered a *Hello Cthulhu!* holo on the plaque that names its rider: languid fluffy pink tentacles wave at him in an attack of *kawai*. "I'm Manfred—*Manfred*. My memory. What's happened to my memory?" Elderly Malaysian tourists point at him from the open top deck of a passing tour bus. He suddenly burns with a sense of horrified urgency. *I was going somewhere,* he recalls. *What was I doing?* It was amazingly important, he thinks, but he can't remember what exactly it *was*. He was going to see someone about—it's on the tip of his tongue—

Welcome to the eve of the third decade: a time of chaos.

Most of the thinking power on the planet is now manufactured rather than born; there are ten microprocessors for every human being, and the number is doubling every fourteen months. Population growth in the developing world has stalled, the birth rate dropping below replacement level: in the wired nations, more forward-looking politicians are looking for ways to enfranchise their nascent AI base.

Space exploration is still stalled on the cusp of the second recession of the century. The Malaysian government has announced the goal of placing an Imam on Mars within ten years, but nobody else cares enough to try.

The Space Settlers Society is still trying to interest DisneyCorp in the media rights to their latest L5 colony plan, unaware that there's already a

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colony out there and it isn't human: first-generation uploads, Californian spiny lobsters in wobbly symbiosis with elderly expert systems, thrive aboard an asteroid mining project established by the Franklin Trust. (The lobsters had needed sanctuary, away from a planet overflowing with future-shocked primates. In return for Franklin's beaming a copy of their state vector out over the deep space tracking network, they agreed to run his cometary Von Neumann factory.)

Two years ago JPL, the ESA, and the uploaded lobster colony on comet Kruschev-7 picked up an apparently artificial signal from outside the solar system; most people don't know, and of those who do, even fewer care. After all, if NASA can't even put a man on the moon. . . .

Portrait of a wasted youth:

Jack is seventeen years and eleven months old. He has never met his father; he was unplanned, and Da managed to kill himself in a construction accident before the Child Support could garnish his income for the upbringing. His mother raised him in a two-bedroom association flat in Hawick. She worked in a call center when he was young, but business dried up: humans aren't needed on the end of a phone any more. Now she works in a drop-in business shop, stacking shelves for virtual fly-by-nights that come and go like tourists in the Festival season—but humans aren't in demand for shelf-stacking either, these days.

His mother sent Jack to a local religious school, where he was regularly excluded, and effectively ran wild from the age of twelve. By thirteen, he was wearing a parole cuff for shoplifting: by fourteen, he'd broken his collarbone in a car crash while joyriding, and the dour Presbyterian sheriff sent him to the Wee Frees, who completed the destruction of his educational prospects with high principles and illicit beatings.

Today, he's a graduate of the hard school of avoiding public surveillance cameras, with distinctions in steganographic alibi construction. Mostly, this entails high-density crime—if you're going to mug someone, do so where there are so many bystanders that they can't pin the blame on you. But the Polis expert systems are catching up with him: if he keeps it up at this rate, in another four months they'll have a positive statistical correlation that will convince even a jury of his peers that he's guilty as fuck—and then he'll go down to Saughton for four years.

But Jack doesn't understand the meaning of a Gaussian distribution or the significance of a chi-squared test, and the future still looks bright to him as he pulls on the chunky spectacles he ripped off the tourist gawking at the statue on North Bridge. And after a moment, when they begin whispering into his ears in stereo and showing him pictures of the tourist's vision, it looks even brighter.

"Gotta make a deal, gotta close a deal," whisper the glasses. "Get a runner, liberate the potential." Weird graphs in lurid colors are filling up his peripheral vision, like the hallucinations of a drugged marketroid.

"Who the fuck *are* you?" asks Jack, intrigued by the bright lights and icons.

"I am you, you are we, got a deal to close," murmur the glasses. "Dow Jones down fifteen points, Federated Confidence up three, incoming briefing on causal decoupling of social control of skirt hem lengths, shaving pattern of beards, and emergence of multidrug antibiotic resistance in gram negative bacilli: accept?"

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"Ah kin tae it," Jack mumbles, and a torrent of images crashes down on his eyeballs and jackhammers its way in through his ears like the superego of a disembodied giant. Which is actually what he's stolen. The glasses and waist pouch he grabbed from the tourist are stuffed with enough hardware to run the entire internet, circa the turn of the millennium. They've got bandwidth coming out the wazoo, distributed engines running a bazillion inscrutable search tasks, and a whole slew of high-level agents that collectively form a large chunk of the society of mind that is their owner's personality. Their owner is an agalmic entrepreneur, a posthuman genius loci of the net who catalyses value wherever he goes, leaving money trees growing in his footprints. This man doesn't believe in zero-sum games, in a loser for every winner. And Jack has stolen his memories. There are microcams built into the frame of the glasses, pickups in the ear-pieces; everything is spooled into the holographic cache in the belt pack, before being distributed for remote storage. At four months per terabyte, memory storage is cheap: what makes this bunch so unusual is that their owner—Manfred—has cross-indexed them with his agents.

In a very real sense, the glasses *are* Manfred, regardless of the identity of the soft machine with its eyeballs behind the lenses. And it is a very puzzled Manfred who picks himself up, and, with a curious vacancy in his head—except for a hesitant request for information about accessories for Russian army boots—dusts himself off, and heads for his meeting on the other side of town.

"Something, he is not there, something is *wrong*," says the woman. She raises her mirrorshades and rubs her left eye, visibly worried. With crewcut hair, and wearing a black trouser suit with narrow lapels, she looks like a G-man from a 1960's conspiracy movie.

Gianni nods and leans back, regarding her from behind his desk. "Manfred are prone to fits of do his own thing with telling nobody in advance," he points out. "Do you have concrete reason to suspect something is wrong?" Despite his words he looks slightly worried. Manfred is a core team member; losing him at this point could be more than embarrassing. Besides, he's a friend—as such things go for posthumans.

The office translator is good, but it can't provide realtime lip-synch morphing between French and Italian: Annette has to make an effort to listen to his words because the shape of his mouth is all wrong, like a badly dubbed video. And the desk switches from black ash to rosewood abruptly, halfway across its expanse, and the air currents are all wrong. "His answerphone, it is very good. Like Manfred, it does not lie convincingly."

"But it doesn't pass the Turing test. Yet."

"*Non*." A smile flashes across her face, rapidly replaced by worry lines. "Where can he be? You are relying on him and I—"

The minister prods at the highly polished rosewood desktop; the woodgrain slips, sliding into a strangely different conformation, generating random dot stereoisograms—messages for his eyes only. "You will find him in Scotland," he says after a moment. "That was on his Outlook. I find it harder to trace his exact whereabouts—the privacy safeguards—but if you, as next of kin by common law, travel in person . . ."

"I go."

The woman in black stands up, surprising a vacuum cleaner that skulks behind her desk. "Au revoir!"

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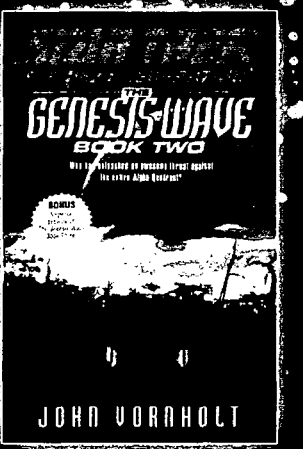

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"Ciao."

As she vacates her office, the minister flickers off behind her, leaving the far wall the dull grey of a cold display panel. Outside, she's cut off from the shared groupspace that she, and Gianni, and the rest of the team, have established. Gianni is in Rome; she's in Paris, Markus is in Dusseldorf, and Eva's in Wrocklaw. There are others, trapped in digital cells scattered halfway across an elderly continent: but as long as they don't try to shake hands, they're free to shout across the office at each other. Their confidences and dirty jokes tunnel through multiple layers of anonymized communication. Gianni can swing the best facilities, and it's a good thing too. He's making his break out of regional politics and into European national affairs. their job—his election team—is to get him a seat on the Confederacy Commission, as Representative for Intelligence Oversight, and push the boundaries of post-humanitarian action outward, into deep space and deeper time. Which makes their casual working conversation profoundly interesting to certain people. The walls have ears, and not all the brains attached to them are human.

Annette is more worried than she's letting on to Gianni. It's unlike Manfred to be out of contact for long: even odder for his receptionist to stonewall her, given that her apartment is the nearest thing to a home he's had for the past couple of years. But something smells fishy. He sneaked out last night, saying it would be an overnight trip, and now he's not answering. *Could it be his ex-wife?* she wonders: but no, there's been no word from the obsessive bitch for months, other than the sarcastic cards she dispatches every year without fail, timed to arrive on the birthday of the daughter Manfred has never met. *The music mafia? A letter bomb from the Copyright Enforcement Front?* But no, his medical monitor would have been screaming its head off if anything like that had happened. She's organized things so that he's safe from the intellectual property thieves, lent him the guiding hand he needs. She gets a warm sense of accomplishment whenever she considers how complementary their abilities are: how much of a mess he was in before he met her for the second time, eyes meeting across a microsat launcher in an abandoned supermarket outside London. But that's exactly why she's worried now. The watchdog hasn't barked. . . .

Annette takes a taxi to Charles de Gaulle, uses her parliamentary carte to bump an executive-class seat on the next A320 to Turnhouse, Edinburgh's airport. The plane is climbing out over la Manche before it hits her: what if the Franklin Collective isn't as harmless as he thinks?

The hospital emergency suite has a waiting room with green plastic bucket seats and subtractive volume renderings by pre-teens stuck to the walls like surreal Lego sculptures. It's deeply silent, the available bandwidth all sequestrated for medical monitors—there are children crying, periodic sirens wailing as ambulances draw up, and people chattering all around him, but to Manfred, it's like being at the bottom of a deep blue pool of quiet. He feels stoned, except that there's no euphoria with this drug. Corridor-corner vendors hawk kebab-spitted pigeons next to the chained and rusted voluntary service booth; video cameras watch the blue bivvy bags of the chronic cases lined up next to the nursing station. Alone in his own head, Manfred is frightened and confused.

"I can't check you in 'less you sign the confidentiality agreement," says the triage nurse, pushing an antique clipboard at Manfred's face. Service in the

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NHS is still free, but steps have been taken to reduce the incidence of scandals: "sign the nondisclosure clause here and here, or the house officer won't see you."

Manfred stares blearily up at the nurse's nose, which is red and slightly inflamed from a nosocomial infection. His phones are bickering again, and he can't remember why; they don't normally behave like this, something must be missing, but thinking about it is hard. "Why am I here?" he asks for the third time.

"Sign it." A pen is thrust into his hand. He focuses on the page, jerks upright as deeply canalized reflexes kick in.

"This is theft of human rights! It says here that the party of the second part is enjoined from disclosing information relating to the operations management triage procedures and processes of the said healthgiving institution, that's you, to any third party—that's the public media—on pain of forfeiture of health benefits pursuant to section two of the Health Service Reform Act. I can't sign this! You could repossess my left kidney if I post on the net about how long I've been in hospital!"

"So don't sign, then." The nurse shrugs, hitches up his sari, and walks away. "Enjoy your wait!"

Manfred pulls out his backup phone and stares at its megapixel display. "Something *wrong* here." The keypad beeps as he laboriously inputs opcodes. This gets him into an X.25 PAD, and he has a vague, disturbing memory that hints about where he can go from here—mostly into the long-since decommissioned bowels of NHSNet—but the memories spring a page fault and die, somewhere between fingertips and the moment when understanding dawns. It's a frustrating feeling: his brain is like an ancient car engine with damp spark plugs, turning over and over without catching fire.

The kebab vendor next to Manfred's seating rail chucks a stock cube on his grill; it begins to smoke, aromatic and blue and herbal—cannabinoids to induce tranquility and appetite. Manfred sniffs twice, then staggers to his feet and heads off in search of the toilet, his head spinning. He's mumbling at his wrist watch: "*hello, Guatemala? Get me posology please. Click down my meme tree, I'm confused. Oh shit. Who was I? What happened? Why is everything blurry? I can't find my glasses. . . .*"

A gaggle of day-trippers are leaving the leprosy ward, men and women dressed in anachronistic garb: men in dark suits, women in long dresses. All of them wear electric blue disposable gloves and face masks. There's a hum and crackle of encrypted bandwidth emanating from them, and Manfred instinctively turns to follow them. They leave the A&E unit through the wheelchair exit, two ladies escorted by three gentlemen, with a deranged distressed refugee from the twenty-first century shuffling dizzily after. *They're all young*, Manfred realizes vaguely. *Where's my cat?* Aineko might be able to make sense of this, if Aineko was interested.

"I rather fancy we should retire to the club house," says one young beau: "oh yes! please!" his short blonde companion chirps, clapping her hands together, then irritably stripping off the anachronistic plastic gloves to reveal wired lace positional-sensor mitts underneath. "This trip has obviously been unproductive. If our contact is here, I see no easy way of locating him without breach of medical confidence or a hefty gratuity."

"The poor things," murmurs the other woman, glancing back at the leprosarium. "Such a humiliating way to die!"

"Their own fault: if they hadn't participated in antibiotic abuse they

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wouldn't be in the isolation ward," harrumphs a twenty-something with mutton-chops and the manner of a precocious paterfamilias. He raps his walking stick on the pavement for punctuation, and they pause for a flock of cyclists and a rickshaw before they cross the road onto the Meadows. "Degenerate medication compliance, degenerate immune systems."

Manfred pauses to survey the grass, brain spinning as he ponders the fractal dimensionality of leaves: then he lurches after them, nearly getting himself run down by a flywheel-powered tourist bus. *Club*. His feet hit the pavement; cross it, thud down onto three billion years of vegetative evolution: *Something about those people.* He feels a weird yearning, a tropism for information. It's almost all that's left of him—his voracious will to know. The tall, dark-haired woman hitches up her long skirts to keep them out of the mud: he sees a flash of iridescent petticoats that ripple like oil on water, worn over old-fashioned combat boots. Not Victorian, then: something else. *I came here to see*—the name is on the tip of his tongue. Almost. He feels that it has something to do with these people.

The squad crosses the Meadows by way of a tree-lined path, and comes to a Georgian cheesecake frontage with wide steps and a polished brass doorbell. They enter, and the man with the mutton-chops pauses on the threshold and turns to face Manfred. "You've followed us this far," he says. "Do you want to come in? You might find what you're looking for."

Manfred follows with knocking knees, desperately afraid of whatever he's forgotten.

Annette sits cross-legged on the hotel room floor and interrogates Manfred's cat.

"When did you last see him?"

Aineko turns its head away from her and concentrates on washing the inside of its left leg. Its fur is lifelike and thick, pleasingly patterned except for a manufacturer's URL emblazoned on its flanks: but the mouth produces no saliva, the throat opens on no stomach or lungs. "Go away," it says, "I'm busy."

"When did you last see Manfred?" she repeats intently. "I don't have time for this. The Polis don't know. The medical services don't know. He's off-net and not responding. So what can *you* tell me?"

"Neko mod two alpha requires maintenance downtime on a regular basis," the cat says pompously. "You knew that when you bought me this body. What were you expecting, five-nines uptime from a lump of meat?" The tongue rasps out then pauses while microprobes in its underside replace the hairs that fell out earlier in the day.

Annette sighs. Manfred's had this robot cat for six years, and his ex-wife Pamela used to mess with its neural wiring, too; this is its third body, and it's getting more realistically uncooperative with every hardware upgrade. Sooner or later it's going to demand a litter tray and start throwing up on the carpet out of spite. "Command override," she says. "Dump event log to my Cartesian theater, minus eight hours to present."

The cat shudders and looks round at her. "Human bitch!" it hisses. Then it freezes in place as the air fills with a bright and silent tsunami of data. Both Annette and Aineko are wired for extremely high-bandwidth spread-spectrum optical networking; an observer would see the cat's eyes, and a ring on her left hand, glow blue-white at each other. After a few seconds, Annette nods to herself and wiggles her fingers in the air, navigating a time se-

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quence only she can see. Aineko hisses jealousy at her, then stands and stalks away, tail held high.

"Curiouser and curiouser," Annette hums to herself. She intertwines her fingers, pressing obscure pressure-points on knuckle and wrist, then sighs and rubs her eyes. "He left here under his own power, looking normal," she calls to the cat. "Who did he say he was going to see?" The cat sits in a beam of sunlight falling in through the high glass window, pointedly showing her its back. "*Merde*! If you're not going to help him—"

"Try the Grass Market," sulks the cat. "He was going to see the Franklin Collective. Much good *they'll* do him. . . ."

A man wearing second-hand Chinese combat fatigues and a horribly expensive pair of glasses bounces up a flight of damp stone steps beneath a keystone that announces the building to be a Salvation Army hostel. He bangs on the door, his voice almost drowned out by the pair of Cold War Reenactment Society MiGs that are buzzing the castle up the road: "Open up! You goata deal cummin!"

A peephole set in the door at eye-level slides to one side, and a pair of beady black-eyed video cameras peer out at him. "Who are you and what do you want?" the speaker crackles.

"I'm Macx," he says. "You've heard from my systems: I'm here to offer you a deal you can't refuse." At least that's what his glasses tell him to say: what comes out of his mouth sounds a bit more like *ah'm Macx: yiv hurdfrae mahsystem, ahm hereta gie yer a deal ye cannae refuse.* The glasses haven't had long enough to work on his accent. Meanwhile, he's so full of himself that he snaps his fingers and does a little dance of impatience on the top step.

"Aye, well, hold on a minute." The person on the other side of the speakerphone has the kind of cut-glass Morningside accent that manages to sound more English than the King while remaining vernacular Scots. The door opens and Macx finds himself confronted by a tall, slightly cadaverous man wearing a tweed suit that has seen better days and a clerical collar cut from a translucent circuit board. His face is almost concealed behind a pair of recording angel goggles. "Who did you say you were?"

"I'm Macx! Manfred Macx! I'm here with an opportunity you wouldn't fooking believe. I've got the answer to your Church's financial situation. I'm going to make you rich!" The glasses prompt, and Macx speaks.

The man in the doorway tilts his head slightly, goggles scanning Macx from head to foot. Bursts of blue combustion products spurt from Macx's heels as he bounces up and down enthusiastically. "Are you sure ye've got the right address?" he asks worriedly.

"Aye, am thit."

The resident backs into the hostel: "Well then, come in, sit yourself down and tell me all about it."

Macx bounces into the room with his brain wide-open to a blizzard of pie charts and growth curves, documents spawning in the bizarre phase-space of his corporate management software. "I've got a deal you ain't going to believe," he begins, gliding past noticeboards upon which Church circulars are staked out to die like exotic butterflies, stepping over rolled-up carpets and a stack of laptops left over from a jumble sale, past the devotional radio telescope that does double-duty as Mrs. Muirhouse's back-garden bird-bath. "You've been here five years and your posted accounts show you aren't making much money—barely keeping the rent up. But you're a shareholder in

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Scottish Nuclear Electric, right? Most of the Church funds are in the form of a trust left to the church by one of your congregants when they went to join the omega point, right?"

"Er." The vicar looks at him oddly. "I canna comment on the Church eschatological investment trust. Why d'ye think that?"

They fetch up, somehow, in the vicar's office. A huge, framed rendering hangs over the back of his threadbare office chair: the collapsing cosmos of the End Times, galactic clusters rotten with the Dyson Spheres of the eschaton falling toward the Big Crunch. Saint Tipler beams down from above with avuncular approval, a ring of quasars forming a halo around his head. Posters proclaim the new Gospel: COSMOLOGY IS BETTER THAN GUESSWORK, and LIVE FOREVER WITHIN MY LIGHT-CONE. "Can I get you anything?" asks the vicar. "Cup of tea? Battery charge point?"

"Crystal meth?" asks Macx, hopefully. His face falls as the vicar shakes his head apologetically. "Aw, dinna worry, I was only jesting." He leans forward: "I know all about your plutonium futures speculation," he hisses. A finger taps his stolen spectacles in an ominous gesture: "These don't just record, they *think*. An' I know where the money's gone."

"What have you got?" the vicar asks coldly, any indication of good humor flown. "I'm going to have to edit down these memories, you bastard. Bits of me that *aren't* going to merge with the godhead at the end of time!"

"Keep yer shirt on. What's the point of saving it all up if you ain't got a life worth living? You reckon the big yin's not going to unnderstan' a knees-up?"

"What do you *want?*"

"Aye, well," Macx leans back, aggrieved. "I got—" he pauses. An expression of extreme confusion flits over his head. "I got *lobsters,*" he finally announces. "Genetically engineered uploaded lobsters, to run your uranium reprocessing plant. I wuz going to help you out by showing you how to get your money back where it belongs, so you could make the council tax due date. See, they're neutron-resistant, the lobsters. No, that can't be right. I was going to sell you something you could use, for—" his face slumps into a frown of disgust—"*free?*"

Approximately thirty seconds later, as he is picking himself up off the front steps of the First Reformed Church of Tipler (Astrophysicist), the man who would be Macx finds himself wondering if maybe this high finance shit isn't as easy as it's cracked up to be. Some of the agents in his glasses are wondering if elocution lessons are the answer: others aren't so optimistic.

Getting back to the history lesson, the prospects for the decade look mostly medical.

A few thousand elderly baby boomers are converging on Tehran for Woodstock Four. Western Europe is desperately trying to import eastern European nurses and home-care assistants; in Japan, whole agricultural villages lie vacant and decaying, ghost communities sucked dry as cities suck people in like residential black holes.

Rumor is spreading throughout gated shelter communities in the American mid-west: a vaccine against senescence, a slow virus coded in the genome that evolution hasn't weeded out. As usual, Charles Darwin gets more than his fair share of the blame. (Less spectacular but more realistic treatments for old age—telomere reconstruction and hexose-denatured protein reduction—are available in private clinics for those who are willing to surrender their pensions.) Progress is expected to speed up shortly, as the

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fundamental patents in genomic engineering begin to expire: the Free Chromosome Foundation has already published a manifesto calling for the creation of an intellectual-property free genome with improved replacements for all commonly defective exons.

Experiments in digitizing and running neural wetware under emulation are well-established; some radical libertarians claim that as the technology matures, death—with its draconian curtailment of property and voting rights—will become the biggest civil liberties issue of all.

For a small extra fee, most veterinary insurance policies cover cloning your pet dog or cat in event of their accidental and distressing death. Human cloning, for reasons nobody is very clear on any more, is still illegal in most developed nations—but very few judiciaries push for mandatory abortion of identical twins.

Some commodities are expensive: the price of crude oil has broken sixty euros a barrel and is edging inexorably up. Other commodities are cheap: computers, for example—hobbyists print off weird new processor architectures on their home inkjets, middle-aged folks wipe their backsides with diagnostic paper that can tell how their VHDL levels are tending.

The latest casualties of the march of technological progress are: the High Street clothes shop, the flushing toilet, the Main Battle Tank, and the first-generation of quantum computers. New with the decade are cheap enhanced immune systems, brain implants that hook right into the Chomsky organ and talk to you using your own inner voice, and widespread public paranoia about limbic spam. Nanotechnology has shattered into a dozen disjoint disciplines, and skeptics are predicting that it will all peter out before long. Philosophers have ceded qualia to engineers, and the current difficult problem in AI is getting software to experience embarrassment.

Fusion power is still, of course, fifty years away.

The Victorians are morphing into Goths before Manfred's culture-shocked eyes.

"You looked lost," explains Monica, leaning over him curiously. "What's with your eyes?"

"I can't see too well," Manfred tries to explain. Everything is a blur, and the voices that usually chatter incessantly in his head have left nothing behind but a roaring silence. "I mean, someone *mugged* me. They took—" his hand closes on air: something is missing from his belt.

Monica, the tall woman he first saw in the hospital, enters the room. What she's wearing indoors is skin-tight, iridescent, and, disturbingly, claims to be a distributed extension of her neuroectoderm. Stripped of costume-drama accoutrements, she's a twenty-first century adult, born or decanted after the millennial baby boom. She waves some fingers in Manfred's face: "How many?"

"Two." Manfred tries to concentrate. "What—"

"No concussion," she says briskly. "'Scuse me while I page." Her eyes are brown, with amber raster-lines flickering across her pupils. *Contact lenses?* Manfred wonders, his head turgid and unnaturally slow. It's like being drunk, except much less pleasant: he can't seem to wrap his head around an idea from all angles at once any more. *Is this what consciousness used to be like?* It's an ugly, slow sensation. She turns away from him: "MEDLINE says you'll be all right in a while. The main problem is the identity loss. Are you backed-up anywhere?"

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"Here." Alan, still top-hatted and mutton-chopped, holds out a pair of spectacles to Manfred. "Take these, they may do you some good." His topper wobbles, as if a strange A-life experiment is struggling to escape from its false bottom.

"Oh. Thank you." Manfred reaches for them with a pathetic sense of gratitude. As soon as he puts them on, they run through a test series, whispering questions and watching how his eyes focus: after a minute, the room around him clears as the specs build a synthetic image to compensate for his myopia. There's limited net access too, he notices, a warm sense of relief stealing over him. "Do you mind if I call somebody?" he asks: "I want to check my backups."

"Be my guest." Alan slips out through the door; Monica sits down opposite him and stares into some inner space. The room has a tall ceiling, with whitewashed walls and wooden shutters to cover the aerogel window bays. The furniture is modern modular, and it clashes somewhat. "We were expecting you."

"You were—" he shifts track with an effort: "I was here to see somebody. Here in Scotland, I mean."

"Us." She catches his eye deliberately. "To discuss sapience options with our patron."

"With your—" he squeezes his eyes shut. "*Damn*. I don't *remember*. I need my glasses back! Please."

"What about your backups?" she asks curiously.

"A moment." Manfred tries to remember what address to ping. It's useless, and painfully frustrating. "It would help if I could remember where I keep the rest of my mind," he complains. "It used to be at—oh, *there*."

An elephantine semantic network sits down on his spectacles as soon as he asks for the site, crushing his surroundings into blocky pixilated monochrome that jerks as he looks around. "This is going to take some time," he warns his hosts as a goodly chunk of his metacortex tries to handshake with his brain over a wireless network connection that was really only designed for web browsing. The download consists of the part of his consciousness that isn't security-critical—public-access actors and vague opinionated rants—but it clears down a huge memory castle, maps miracles and wonders and entire hotel suites onto the whitewashed walls of his mind.

When Manfred can see the outside world again, he feels a bit more like himself: he can, at least, spawn a search thread that will resynchronize and fill him in on what it found. He still can't access the inner mysteries of his soul (including his personal memories); they're locked and barred pending biometric verification of his identity and a quantum key exchange. But he has his wits about him again—and some of them are even working. It's like sobering up from a strange new drug, the infinitely reassuring sense of being back at the controls of his own head. "I think I need to report a crime," he tells Monica—or whoever is plugged into Monica's head right now, because now he knows where he is and who he was meant to meet (although not *why*)—and he understands that, for the Franklin Collective, identity is a politically loaded issue.

"A crime report." Her expression is subtly mocking. "Identity theft, by any chance?"

"Yeah, yeah, I know: identity *is* theft, don't trust anyone whose state vector hasn't forked for more than a gigasecond, change is the only constant, et

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bloody cetera. Who am I talking to, by the way? And if we're talking, doesn't that signify that you think we're on the same side more or less?" He struggles to sit up in the recliner chair: stepper motors whine softly as it strives to accommodate him.

"Sidedness is optional." The woman who is Monica some of the time looks at him quirkily: "It tends to alter drastically if you vary the number of dimensions. Let's just say that right now I'm Monica, plus our sponsor. Will that do you?"

"Our sponsor, who is in cyberspace—"

She leans back on the sofa, which whines and extrudes an occasional table with a small bar. "Drink? Can I offer you coffee? Guarana? Or maybe a Berlinnerweise, for old times' sake?"

"Guarana will do. Hello, Bob. How long have you been dead?"

She chuckles. "I'm not dead, Manny. I may not be a full upload, but I *feel* like me." She rolls her eyes, self-consciously. "He's making rude comments about your wife," she adds: "I'm not going to pass that on."

"My ex-wife," Manfred corrects her automatically. "The, uh, tax vamp. So. You're acting as a, I guess, an interpreter for Bob?"

"Ack." She looks at Manfred very seriously: "We owe him a lot, you know. He left his assets in trust to the movement along with his partials. We feel obliged to instantiate his personality as often as possible, even though you can only do so much with a couple of petabytes of recordings. But we have help."

"The lobsters." Manfred nods to himself and accepts the glass that she offers. Its diamond-plated curves glitter brilliantly in the late afternoon sunlight. "I *knew* this had something to do with them." He leans forward, holding his glass and frowns. "If only I could remember why I came here! It was something emergent, something in deep memory . . . something I didn't trust in my own skull. Something to do with Bob."

The door behind the sofa opens; Alan enters, wearing an early twentieth-century business suit. "Excuse me," he says quietly, and heads for the far side of the room. A workstation folds down from the wall and a chair rolls in from a service niche: he sits with his chin propped on his hands, staring at the white desktop. Every so often he mutters quietly to himself: *"Yes, I understand . . . campaign headquarters . . . donations need to be audited . . ."*

"Gianni's election campaign," Monica prompts him.

Manfred jumps. "Gianni—" a bundle of memories unlock inside his head as he remembers his political front man's message. "Yes! That's what this is about. It has to be!" He looks at her excitedly. "I'm here to deliver a message to you from Gianni Vittoria. About—" he looks crestfallen. "I'm not sure," he trails off uncertainly, "but it was important. Whoever mugged me got the message."

The Grass Market is an overly rustic cobbled square nestled beneath the glowering battlements of Castle Rock. Annette stands on the site of the gallows where they used to execute witches; she sends forth her invisible agents to search for spoor of Manfred. Aineko, overly familiar, drapes over her left shoulder like a satanic stole and delivers a running stream of cracked cellphone chatter into her ear.

"I don't know where to begin," she sighs, annoyed. This place is wall-to-wall tourist trap, a many-bladed carnivorous plant that digests easy credit and spits out the drained husks of foreigners. The road has been pedestri-

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anized and resurfaced in squalidly authentic mediaeval cobblestones; in the middle of what used to be the parking lot, there's a permanent floating antique market where you can buy anything from a brass fire surround to an antique CD player. Much of the merchandise in the shops is generic dotcom trash, vying for the title of Japanese-Scottish souvenir-from-hell: Puroland tartans, animatronic Nessies hissing bad-temperedly at knee level, secondhand schleptops. People swarm everywhere, from the theme pubs (hangings seem to be a running joke hereabouts) to the expensive dress shops with their fabric renderers and digital mirrors. Street performers, part of the permanent floating Fringe, clutter the sidewalk: a robotic mime, very traditional in silver face-paint, mimics the gestures of passers-by with ironically stylized motions.

"Try the doss house," Aineko suggests from the shelter of her shoulder bag.

"The—" Annette does a double-take as her thesaurus conspires with her open government firmware and dumps a geographical database of city social services into her sensorium. "Oh, I see." The Grass Market itself is touristy, but the bits off to one end—down a dingy canyon of forbidding stone buildings six stories high—are decidedly downmarket. "Okay."

Annette weaves past a stall selling disposable cellphones and cheaper genome explorers: round a gaggle of teenage girls in the grips of some kind of imported kawai fetish, who look at her in alarm from atop their pink platform heels—probably mistaking her for a school probation inspector—and past a stand of chained and parked bicycles. The human attendant looks bored out of her mind. Annette tucks a blandly anonymous ten euro note in her pocket almost before she notices. "If you were going to buy a hot bike," she asks, "where would you go?" The parking attendant stares at her, and for a moment Annette thinks she's overestimated her. Then she mumbles something. "What?"

"McMurphy's. Used to be called Bannerman's. Down Cowgate, thataway." The meter maid looks anxiously at her rack of charges. "You didn't—"

"Uh-huh." Annette follows her gaze: straight down the dark stone canyon. *Well, okay*. "This had better be worth it, Manny *mon cher,*" she mutters under her breath.

McMurphy's is a fake Irish pub, a stone grotto installed beneath a mound of blank-faced offices. It was once a real Irish pub, before the developers got their hands on it and mutated it in rapid succession into a punk night club, a wine bar, and a fake Dutch coffee shop; after which, as burned out as any star, it left the main sequence. Now it occupies an unnaturally prolonged, chilly existence as the sort of recycled imitation Irish pub that has neon four-leafed clovers hanging from the artificially blackened pine beams above the log tables—in other words, the black-dwarf afterlife of the serious drinking establishment. Somewhere along the line, the beer cellar was replaced with a toilet (leaving more room for paying patrons upstairs), and now its founts dispense fizzy concentrate diluted with water from the city mains.

"Say, did you hear the one about the Eurocrat with the robot pussy who goes into a dodgy pub on the Cowgate and orders a Coke? And when it arrives, she says hey, where's the mirror?"

"Shut *up*," Annette hisses into her shoulder bag. "It isn't *funny*." Her personal intruder telemetry has just emailed her wristphone, and it's displaying a rotating yellow exclamation point, which means that according to the

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published police crime stats this place is likely to do grievous harm to her insurance premiums.

Aineko looks up at her and yawns cavernously, baring a pink, ribbed mouth and a tongue like pink suede. "Want to make me? I just pinged Manny's head. The network latency was trivial."

The barmaid sidles up and pointedly manages not to make eye contact with Annette. "A Diet Coke," she says. In the direction of her bag, voice pitched low: "did you hear the one about the Eurocrat who goes into a dodgy pub, orders half a liter of Diet Coke, and when she spills it in her shoulder bag, she says oops, I've got a wet pussy?"

The Coke arrives. Annette pays for it. There may be a couple of dozen people in the pub; it's hard to tell because it looks like an ancient cellar, lots of stone archways leading off into niches populated with second-hand church pews and knife-scabbed tables. Some guys who might be bikers, students, or well-dressed winos are hunched over one table: hairy, wearing vests with too many pockets, an artful bohemianism that makes Annette blink until one of her literary programs informs her that one of them is a moderately famous local writer, a bit of a guru for the space-and-freedom party. There're a couple of women in boots and furry hats in one corner poring over the menu, and a parcel of off-duty street performers hunching over their beers in a booth. Nobody else in here is wearing anything remotely like office drag, but the weirdness coefficient is above average: so Annette dials her glasses to extra-dark, straightens her tie, and glances around.

The door opens and a nondescript youth slinks in. He's wearing baggy BDUs, wooly cap, and a pair of boots that have that quintessential *essence de panzer division* look, all shock absorbers and olive-drab kevlar panels. He's wearing—

"I spy with my little network intrusion detector," begins the cat, as Annette puts her drink down and moves in on the kid, "something beginning with—"

"How much you want for the glasses?" she asks quietly.

He jerks and almost jumps—a bad idea in MilSpec combat boots, the ceiling in here is eighteenth-century stone half a meter thick; "Dinna fuckin *do* that!" he complains in an eerily familiar way: "I—" he swallows. "Annie! Who—"

"Stay calm. Take them off; they'll only hurt you if you keep wearing them," she says, careful not to move too fast because now she has a second, scary-jittery fear, and she knows without having to look that the exclamation mark on her watch has turned red and begun to flash. "Look, I'll give you two hundred euros for the glasses and the belt pouch, real cash, and I won't ask how you got them or tell anyone." He's frozen in front of her, mesmerized, and she can see the light from inside the lenses spilling over onto his half-starved adolescent cheekbones, flickering like cold lightning, like he's plugged his brain into a grid bearer. Swallowing with a suddenly dry mouth, she slowly reaches up and pulls the spectacles off his face with one hand and takes hold of the belt pouch with the other. The kid shudders and blinks at her, and she sticks a couple of hundred euro notes in front of his nose. "Scram," she says, not unkindly.

He reaches up slowly, then seizes the money and runs—blasts his way through the door with an ear-popping concussion, hangs a left onto the cycle path and vanishes downhill toward the parliament buildings and university complex.

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Annette watches the doorway apprehensively. "Where *is* he?" she hisses, worried: "Any ideas, cat?"

"Naah. It's *your* job to find him," Aineko opines complacently. But there's an icicle of anxiety in Annette's spine: Manfred's been separated from his memory cache? Where could he be? Worse—*who* could he be?

"Fuck you, too," she mutters. "Only one thing for it, I guess." She takes off her own glasses—much less functional than Manfred's massively ramified custom rig—and nervously raises the repo'd specs toward her face. Somehow, what she's about to do makes her feel unclean, like snooping on a lover's email folders. But how else can she figure out where he might have gone?

She slides the glasses on and tries to remember what she was doing yesterday in Edinburgh.

"Gianni?"

"*Oui, ma cherie?*"

Pause. "I lost him. But I got his aide-memoire back. A teenage ligger playing cyberpunk with them. No sign of his location—so I put them on."

Pause. "Oh dear."

"Gianni, why did you send him to the Franklin Collective?"

Pause. (During which, the chill of the gritty stone wall she's leaning on begins to penetrate the weave of her jacket.) "I not wanting to bother you with trivia."

"*Merde*. It's *not* trivia, Gianni, they're *accelerationistas*. Have you any idea what that's going to do to his head?"

Pause: then a grunt, almost of pain. "Yes."

"Then why did you *do* it?" she demands vehemently. She hunches over, punching words into her phone so that other passersby avoid her, unsure whether she's hands-free or hallucinating: "Shit, Gianni, I have to pick up the pieces every time you do this! Manfred is not a healthy man, he's on the edge of acute future shock the whole time, and I was not joking when I told you last February that he'd need a month in a clinic if you tried running him flat out again!"

"Annette." A heavy sigh: "He are the best hope we got. Am knowing half-life of agalmic catalyst now down to six months and dropping; Manny outlast his career expectancy, four deviations outside the normal, yes, we know this. But I are having to break civil rights deadlock *now,* this election. We must achieve consensus, and Manfred are only staffer we got who have hope of talking to collective on its own terms. He are deal-making messenger, not force burn-out, right? We need coalition reserve before term limit lockout followed by gridlock in Brussels, American-style. Is more than vital—is *essential*."

"That's no excuse—"

"Annette, they have partial upload of Bob Franklin. The Franklin Collective is lobbying against the equal rights amendment, defend their position: if ERA passes, all sapients am eligible to vote, own property, upload, download, sideload. Are more important than little grey butt-monsters with cold speculum: whole future depends on it. Manny started all this with crustacean rights: leave uploads covered by copyrights not civil rights and where will we be in fifty years? Was important then, but now, with the transmission the lobsters received—"

"Shit." She turns and leans her forehead against the cool stonework. "I'll

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need a prescription. Ritalin or something. And his location. Leave the rest to me." She doesn't add *that includes peeling him off the ceiling afterward*: that's understood. Nor does she say: *you're going to pay*. That's understood, too. Gianni may be a hard-nosed political fixer, but he looks after his own.

"Location am easy if he find the PLO. GPS coordinates are following—"

"No need. I got his spectacles."

"*Merde,* as you say. Take them to him, *ma cherie*. Bring me the distributed trust rating of Bob Franklin's upload and I bring Bob the jubilee, right to direct his own corporate self again as if still alive. And we pull diplomatic chestnuts out of fire before they burn. Agreed?"

"*Oui.*"

She cuts the connection and begins walking uphill, along the Cowgate (through which farmers once bought their herds to market), toward the permanent floating Fringe, and then the steps up to the Meadows. As she pauses opposite the site of the gallows, a fight breaks out: some Paleolithic hangover takes exception at the robotic mime aping his movements, and swiftly rips its arm off. The mime stands there, sparks flickering inside its shoulder, and looks confused. Two pissed-looking students start forward and punch the short-haired vandal. There is much shouting, in the mutually incomprehensible accents of Oxgangs and the Herriott-Watt Robot Lab. Annette watches the fight, and shudders; it's like a flash-over vision from a universe where the equal rights amendment—with its redefinition of personhood—is rejected by the house of deputies. A universe where to die is to become property and to be created without a gift of parental DNA is to be doomed to slavery.

Maybe Gianni was right, she ponders. *But I wish the price wasn't so personal.*

Manfred can feel one of his attacks coming on. The usual symptoms are all present—the universe, with its vast preponderance of unthinking matter, becomes an affront; weird ideas flicker like heat lightning far away across the vast plateaus of his imagination—but, with his metacortex running in sandboxed insecure mode, he feels *blunt*. And slow. Even *obsolete*. The latter is about as welcome a sensation as heroin withdrawal: he can't spin off threads to explore his designs for feasibility and report back to him. It's like someone has stripped fifty points off his IQ; his brain feels like a surgical scalpel that's been used to cut down trees. A decaying mind is a terrible thing to be trapped inside. Manfred wants out, and he wants out *bad*—but he's too afraid to let on.

"Gianni is a middle-of-the road Eurosocialist, mixed-market pragmatist politician," Bob's ghost accuses Manfred by way of Monica's dye-flushed lips. "What does he think I can do for him?"

"That's a—ah—" Manfred rocks forward and back in his chair, arms crossed firmly and hands thrust under his armpits for protection. "Dismantle the moon! Digitize the biosphere, make a nöosphere out of it—shit, *sorry,* that's long-term planning. *Build Dyson spheres, lots and lots of*—Ahem. Gianni is an ex-Marxist, reformed high-church Trotskyite clade. He believes in achieving True Communism, which is a state of philosophical grace, that requires certain prerequisites like, um, not pissing around with molotov cocktails and thought police: he wants to make everybody so rich that squabbling over ownership of the means of production makes as much sense as arguing over who gets to keep the cave-fire burning. He's not your

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enemy, I mean. He's the enemy of those Stalinist deviationist running dogs in Conservative Party Central Office who want to bug your bedroom and hand everything on a plate to the big corporates owned by the pension funds—which in turn rely on people dying predictably to provide their raison d'être. And, um, more importantly dying and not trying to hang onto their property and chattels. Sitting up in the coffin singing extropian fireside songs, that kind of thing. The actuaries are to blame, predicting life expectancy with intent to cause people to buy insurance policies with money that is invested in control of the means of production—*Bayes' theorem* is to blame—"

Alan glances over his shoulder at Manfred. "I don't think that guarana was a very good idea," he says in tones of deep foreboding.

Manfred's mode of vibration has gone nonlinear by this point. He's rocking front-to-back and jumping up and down in little hops, like a technophiliacal yogic flyer trying to bounce his way to the singularity. Monica leans toward him and her eyes widen. "Manfred," she hisses, "*shut up!*"

He stops babbling abruptly, with an expression of deep puzzlement. "Who am I?" he asks, and keels over backward. "Why am *I,* here and now, occupying this body—"

"Anthropic anxiety attack," Monica comments. "I think he did this in Amsterdam eight years ago when Bob first met him." She looks alarmed, a different identity coming to the fore: "What shall we *do?*"

"We have to make him comfortable." Alan raises his voice. "Bed: make yourself ready, now." The back of the sofa Manfred is sprawled on flops downward, the base folds up, and a strangely animated duvet crawls up over his feet. "Listen, Manny, you're going to be all right."

"Who am I and what do I signify?" Manfred mumbles incoherently. "A mass of propagating decision trees, fractal compression, lots of synaptic junctions lubricated with friendly endorphins—" Across the room, the bootleg pharmacopoeia is cranking up to manufacture some heavy tranquilizers. Monica heads for the kitchen to get something for him to drink them in. "Why are you doing this?" Manfred asks, dizzily.

"It's okay. Lie down and relax." Alan leans over him. "We'll talk about everything in the morning, when you know who you are." (Aside to Monica, who is entering the room with a bottle of iced tea: "Better let Gianni know that he's unwell. One of us may have to go visit the minister. Do you know if Macx has been audited?") "Rest up, Manfred. Everything is being taken care of."

About fifteen minutes later, Manfred—who, in the grip of an existential migraine, meekly obeys Monica's instruction to drink down the spiked tea—lies back on the bed and relaxes. His breathing slows; the subliminal muttering ceases. Monica, sitting next to him, reaches out and takes his right hand, which is lying on top of the bedding.

"Do you want to live forever?" she intones in Bob Franklin's tone of voice. "You can live forever in me. . . ."

The Church of Latter-Day Saints believe that you can't get into the promised land unless they've baptized you—but they can do so if they know your name and parentage, even after you're dead. Their genealogical databases are among the most impressive artifacts of historical research ever prepared. And they like to make converts.

The Franklin Collective believe that you can't get into the future unless

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they've digitized your neural state vector, or at least acquired as complete a snapshot of your sensory inputs and genome as current technology permits. You don't need to be alive for them to do this. Their society of mind is among the most impressive artifacts of computer science. And they like to make converts.

Nightfall in the city. Annette stands impatiently on the doorstep. "Let me the fuck in," she snarls impatiently at the speakerphone. "*Merde!*"

Someone opens the door. "Who—"

Annette shoves him inside, kicks the door shut, and leans on it. "Take me to your boddhisatva," she demands. "*Now*."

"I—" he turns and heads inside, along the gloomy hallway that runs past a staircase. Annette strides after him aggressively. He opens a door and ducks inside, and she follows before he can close it.

Inside, the room is illuminated by a variety of indirect diode sources, calibrated for the warm glow of a summer afternoon's daylight. There's a bed in the middle of it, a figure lying asleep at the heart of a herd of attentive diagnostic instruments. A couple of attendants sit to either side of the sleeping man.

"What have you done to him?" Annette snaps, rushing forward. Manfred blinks up at her from the pillows, bleary-eyed and confused as she leans overhead: "Hello? Manny?" Over her shoulder, "if you 'ave done anything to him—"

"Annie?" He looks puzzled. A bright orange pair of goggles—not his own—is pushed up onto his forehead like a pair of beached jellyfish. "I don't feel well."

"We can fix that," she says briskly. She peels off his glasses and carefully slides them onto his face. The brain bag she puts down next to his shoulder, within easy range. The hairs on the back of her neck rise as a thin chattering keen fills the ether around them: his eyes are glowing a luminous blue behind his shades, as if a high-tension spark is flying between his ears.

"Oh. Wow." He sits up; the covers fall from his naked shoulders and her breath catches.

She looks round at the motionless figure sitting to his left. The man in the chair nods deliberately, ironically. "What have you done to him?"

"We've been looking after him, nothing more, nothing less. He arrived in a state of considerable confusion and his state deteriorated this afternoon."

She's never met this fellow before but she has a gut feeling that she knows him. "You would be Robert . . . Franklin?"

He nods again. "The avatar is *in*." There's a thud as Manfred's eyes roll up in his head and he flops back onto the bedding. "Excuse me. Monica?"

The young woman on the other side of the bed shakes her head. "No, I'm running Bob, too."

"Oh. Well, *you* tell her. I've got to get him some juice."

The woman who is also Bob Franklin—or whatever part of him survived his battle with an exotic brain tumor eight years ago—catches Annette's eye and shakes her head. Smiles faintly. "You're never alone when you're a syncitium."

Annette wrinkles her brow, has to trigger a dictionary attack to parse the sentence. "One large cell, many nuclei? Oh, I see. You have the new implant. The better to record everything."

The youngster shrugs. "You want to die and be resurrected as a third-per-

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son actor in a low-bandwidth re-enactment? Or a shadow of itchy memories in some stranger's skull?" She snorts, a gesture that's at odds with the rest of her body language.

"Bob must have been one of the first borganisms. Humans, I mean." Annette glances over at Manfred, who has begun to snore softly. "It must have been a lot of work."

"The monitoring equipment cost millions, then," says the woman—Monica?—"and it didn't do a very good job. One of the conditions for our keeping access to his research funding is that we regularly run his partials. He wanted to build up a kind of aggregate state vector—patched together out of bits and pieces of other people to supplement the partials that were all I—he—could record with the then state-of-the-art."

"Eh, right." Annette reaches out and absently smoothes a stray hair away from Manfred's forehead. "What is it like to be part of a group mind?"

Monica sniffs, evidently amused. "What is it like to see red? What's it like to be a bat? I can't tell you—I can only show you. We're all free to leave at any time, you know."

"But somehow you don't." Annette rubs her head, feels the short hair over the almost imperceptible scars that conceal a network of implants, tools that Manfred turned down when they became available a year or two ago. ("Goop-phase Darwin-design nanotech ain't designed for clean interfaces," he'd said: "I'll stick to disposable kit, thanks.") "No, thanks. I don't think he'll take up your offer when he wakes up, either."

Monica shrugs. "That's his loss: he won't live forever in the singularity, along with other followers of our gentle teacher. Anyway, we have more converts than we know what to do with."

A thought occurs to Annette. "Ah. You are all of one mind? Partially? A question to you is a question to all?"

"It can be." The words come simultaneously from Monica and the other body, Alan, who is standing in the doorway with a boxy thing that looks like an improvised diagnostician. "What do you have in mind?" Alan continues.

Manfred, lying on the bed, groans: there's an audible hiss of pink noise as his glasses whisper in his ears, bone conduction providing a serial highway to his wetware.

"Manfred was sent to find out why you're opposing the ERA," Annette explains. "Some parts of our team operate without the other's knowledge."

"Indeed." Alan sits down on the chair beside the bed and clears his throat, puffing his chest out pompously. "A very important theological issue. I feel—"

"*I,* or *we?*" Annette interrupts.

"*We* feel," Monica snaps. Then she glances at Alan. "Soo-rrry."

The evidence of individuality within the group mind is disturbing to Annette: too many re-runs of the Borgish fantasy have conditioned her preconceptions. "Please continue."

"One person, one vote, is obsolete," says Alan. "The broader issue of how we value identity needs to be revisited, the franchise reconsidered. Do you get one vote for each warm body? Or one vote for each sapient individual? What about distributed intelligences? The proposals in the Equal Rights Act are deeply flawed, based on a cult of individuality that takes no account of the true complexity of posthumanism."

"Like the proposals for a feminine franchise in the nineteenth century, that would grant the vote to married wives of land-owning men," Monica adds slyly, "it misses the point."

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"Ah, oui." Annette crosses her arms, suddenly defensive. This isn't what she'd expected to hear.

"It misses more than that." Heads turn to face an unexpected direction, Manfred's eyes are open again, and as he glances around the room, Annette can see a spark of interest there that was missing earlier. "Last century, people were paying to have their heads frozen after their death—in hope of reconstruction later. They got no civil rights: the law didn't recognize death as a reversible process. Now how do we account for it when you guys *stop* running Bob? Opt out of the collective borganism? Or maybe opt back in again?" He reaches up and rubs his forehead, tiredly. "Sorry, I haven't been myself lately." A crooked, slightly manic grin flickers across his face. "See, I've been telling Gianni for a whole while, we need a new legal concept of what it is to be a person. One that can cope with sentient corporations, artificial stupidities, secessionists from group minds, and reincarnated uploads. The religiously inclined are having lots of fun with identity issues right now—why aren't we posthumans thinking about these things?"

Annette's bag bulges: Aineko pokes its head out, sniffs the air, squeezes out onto the carpet, and begins to groom itself with perfect disregard for the human by-standers. "Not to mention a-life experiments who think they're the real thing," Manfred adds. "And aliens."

Annette freezes, staring at him. "Manfred! You're not supposed to—"

Manfred is watching Alan, who seems to be the most deeply integrated of the dead venture billionaire's executors: even his expression reminds Annette of meeting Bob Franklin back in Amsterdam, early in the decade, when Manny's personal dragon still owned him. "Aliens," Alan echoes. An eyebrow twitches. "How long have you known?"

"Gianni has his fingers in a lot of pies," Manfred comments blandly. "And we still talk to the lobsters from time to time—you know, they're only a couple of light-hours away, right?" The first-generation uploads, Californian spiny lobsters in wobbly symbiosis with Russian expert systems, had found refuge aboard Franklin's asteroid-mining project—which Manfred prodded Franklin into setting up. The factory had needed sapient control software, and the state of the art in AI was inadequate: the lobsters had needed sanctuary, a home away from the bewilderingly weird cybersphere of earth's anthropoids. "They told us about the signal."

"Er." Alan's eyes glaze over for a moment; Annette's prostheses paint her a picture of false light spraying from the back of his head, his entire sensory bandwidth momentarily soaking up a huge peer-to-peer download from the servers that wallpaper every room in this building. Monica looks irritated, taps her fingernails on the back of her chair. "The signal. Right. Why wasn't this publicized?"

"It was." Annette's eyebrows furrow. "Most people who'd be interested in hearing about an alien contact already believe that they drop round on alternate Tuesdays and Thursdays to administer a rectal exam. Most of the rest think it's a hoax. Quite a few of the remainder are scratching their heads and wondering whether it isn't just a new kind of cosmological phenomenon that emits a very low-entropy directional signal. And of the six who are left over, five are trying to get a handle on the message contents and the last is convinced it's a practical joke."

Manfred fiddles with the bed control system. "It's not a practical joke," he adds. "But they only captured about sixteen megabits of data. There's quite a bit of noise, the signal doesn't repeat, its length doesn't appear to be a

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prime, there's no obvious metainformation that describes the internal format, so there's no easy way of getting a handle on it. To make matters worse, pointy-haired management at Arianespace—" he glances at Annette, as if seeking a response to the naming of her ex-employers—"decided that the best thing to do was to turn it into a piece of music, then copyright the hell out of it and hire the CCAA's lawyers to prosecute anyone else who works on it. So nobody really knows how long it'll take to figure out whether it's a ping from the galactic root domain servers or a pulsar that's taken to grinding out the eighteen-quadrillionth digits of pi, or whatever."

"But." Monica glances around. "You can't be *sure*."

"I think it may be sapient," says Manfred. He finds the right button at last, and the bed begins to fold itself back into a lounger. Then he finds the wrong button; the duvet dissolves into viscous turquoise slime that slurps and gurgles away through a multitude of tiny nozzles in the headboard. "Bloody aerogel. Um. Where was I?" He sits up.

"Sapient network packet?" asks Alan.

"Nope." Manfred shakes his head, grins. "Should have known you'd read Vinge . . . or was it the movie? No, what I *think* is that there's only one logical thing to beam backward and forward out there, and you may remember I asked you to beam it out about, oh, nine years ago?"

"The lobsters." Alan's eyes go blank. "Nine years. Time to Proxima Centauri and back?"

"About that distance, yes," says Manfred. "Officially, the signal came from a couple of degrees off and more than a hundred light years further out. Unofficially, this was disinformation to prevent panic. And no, the signal didn't contain any canned crusties: I think it's an exchange embassy. *Now* do you see why we have to crowbar the civil rights issue open again? We need a framework for rights that can encompass non-humans, and we need it as fast as possible. Otherwise . . ."

"Okay," says Alan. "I'll have to talk with myselves. Maybe we can agree on something, as long as it's clear that it's a provisional stab at the framework and not a permanent solution?"

Annette snorts. "No solution is final!" Monica catches her eye and winks: Annette is startled by the blatant display of dissent within the syncitium.

"Well," says Manfred. "I guess that's all we can ask for?" He looks hopeful. "Thanks for the hospitality, but I feel the need to lie down in my own bed for a while," he adds. "I had to commit a lot to memory while I was offline and I want to record it before I forget myself."

Later that night, a doorbell rings.

"Who's there?" asks the entryphone.

"Uh, me," says the man on the steps. He looks a little confused. "I'm Macx. I'm here to see—" the name is on the tip of his tongue—"someone."

"Come in." A solenoid buzzes; he pushes the door open, and it closes behind him. His metal-shod boots ring on the hard stone floor, and the cool air smells faintly of unburned jet fuel.

"I'm Macx," he repeats uncertainly, "or I *was* fer'a while, an' it made ma heid hurt. But now I'm me agin an' I wanna be somebody else . . . can ye help?"

Later still, a cat sits on a window ledge, watching the interior of a darkened room from behind the concealment of curtains. The room is dark to hu-

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man eyes, but bright to the cat: moonlight cascades silently off the walls and furniture, the twisted bedding, the two naked humans lying curled together in the middle of the bed.

Both the humans are in their early thirties: her close-cropped hair is beginning to grey, distinguished threads of gunmetal wire threading it, while his brown mop is not yet showing signs of age. To the cat, who watches with a variety of unnatural senses, her head glows in the microwave spectrum with a gentle radiance of polarized emissions spread across a wide range of channels. The male shows no such aura: he's unnaturally natural for this day and age, although—oddly—he's wearing spectacles in bed, and the frames shine similarly. An invisible soup of radiation connects both humans to items of clothing scattered across the room—clothing that seethes with unsleeping sentience, dribbling over to their suitcases and hand luggage and (though it doesn't enjoy noticing it) the cat's tail, which is itself a rather sensitive antenna.

The two humans have just finished making love: they do this less often than in their first few years, but with more tenderness and expertise—lengths of shocking pink Hello Kitty bondage tape still hang from the bedposts, and a lump of programmable memory plastic sits cooling on the side table. The male is sprawled with his head and upper torso resting in the crook of the female's left arm and shoulder. Shifting visualization to infrared, the cat sees that she is glowing, capillaries dilating to enhance the blood flow around her throat and chest.

"I'm getting old," the male mumbles. "I'm slowing down."

"Not where it counts," the female replies, gently squeezing his right buttock.

"No, I'm sure of it," he says. "The bits of me that still exist in this old head—how many types of processor can you name that are still in use thirty-plus years after they're born?"

"You're thinking about the implants again," she says carefully. The cat remembers this as a sore point; from being a medical procedure to help the blind see and the autistic talk, intrathecal implants have blossomed into a must-have accessory for the *now* clade. But the male is reluctant. "It's not as risky as it used to be. If they screw up, there're neural growth cofactors and cheap replacement stem cells. I'm sure one of your sponsors can arrange for extra cover."

"Hush: I'm still thinking about it." He's silent for a while. "I wasn't myself yesterday. I was someone else. Someone too slow to keep up. Puts a new perspective on everything. I've been afraid of losing my biological plasticity, of being trapped in an obsolete chunk of skullware while everything moves on—but how much of me lives outside my skull these days, anyhow?" One of his external threads generates an animated glyph and throws it at her mind's eye: she grins at his obscure humor. "Cross-training from a new interface is going to be hard, though."

"You'll do it," she predicts. "You can always get a discreet prescription for novotrophin-B." A neurotransmitter agonist tailored for gerontological wards, it stimulates interest in the new: combined with MDMA, it's a component of the street cocktail called sensawunda. "That should keep you focussed for long enough to get comfortable."

"What's life coming to, when *I* can't cope with the pace of change?" he asks the ceiling plaintively.

The cat lashes its tail irritably.

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"You are my futurological storm-shield," she says, jokingly, and moves her hand to cup his genitals. Most of her current activities are purely biological, the cat notes: from the irregular sideloads, she's using most of her skullware to run ETItalk@home, one of the distributed cracking engines that is trying to decode the alien grammar of a message that Manfred suspects is eligible for citizenship.

Obeying an urge that it can't articulate, the cat sends out a feeler to the nearest router. The cybeast has Manfred's keys; he trusts it implicitly, which is unwise—his ex-wife tampered with it, after all. Tunneling out into the darkness, the cat stalks the net alone. . . .

"Just think about the people who can't adapt," he says. His voice sounds obscurely worried.

"I try not to." She shivers. "You are thirty, you are slowing. What about the young? Are they keeping up, themselves?"

"I have a daughter. She's about a hundred and sixty million seconds old. If Pamela would let me message her I could find out. . . ."

"Don't go there, Manfred. Please."

In the distance, the cat hears the sound of lobster minds singing in the void, a distant feed streaming from their cometary home as it drifts silently out through the asteroid belt, en route to a chilly encounter beyond Neptune. The lobsters sing of alienation and obsolescence, of intelligence too slow and tenuous to support the vicious pace of change that has sand-blasted the human world until all the edges people cling to are jagged and brittle.

Beyond the lobsters, the cat finds an anonymous eternity server: distributed file storage, unerasable, full of secrets and lies that nobody can afford to suppress. Rants, music, rip-offs of the latest Bollywood hits: the cat spiders past them all, looking for the final sample. Grabbing it—a momentary breakup in Manfred's spectacles the only symptom either human notices—the cat drags its prey home, sucks it down, and diffs it against the data sample Annette's exocortex is analyzing.

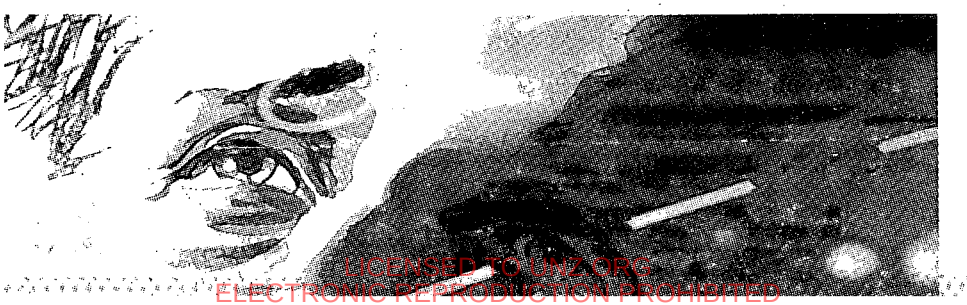
"I'm sorry, my love. I just sometimes feel—" he sighs. "Age is a process of closing off opportunities behind you. I'm not young enough any more: I've lost the dynamic optimism."

The data sample on the pirate server differs from the one Annette's implant is processing.

"You'll get it back," she reassures him quietly, stroking his side. "You are still sad from being mugged. This also will pass. You'll see."

"Yeah." He finally relaxes, dropping back into the reflexive assurance of his own will. "I'll get over it, one way or another. Or someone who remembers being me will. . . ."

In the darkness, Aineko bares teeth in a silent grin. Behind its feline eyes, a braid of processes running on an abstract virtual machine asks it a question that cannot be encoded in any human grammar. *Watch and wait,* it replies to the alien tourist. *They'll figure it out, sooner or later.* ❍



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When the Aliens Ask of Art

Odd you should ask me,
inclined as I am to offer
a thousand sorrows humans
visit upon each other, but I see
you've grown tired of random,
dime-a-dozen litanies,
when you've caught the scent
of art. Very well.
Of art:

Here are figure skaters.
A line is left describing
where they've been, a cold
cartography. The patterns?
They mean nothing.
They do not commend
one route over any other.
That would not be art.
I see you understand this.

You see how arms can grace
a circle or make you think
of wind on grass. Note
how the female seems
to push her heart out
through the palms of her hands,
then brings them back empty.
Art is a ladle you offer
to passersby, never asking names.

—Amy Miller

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Hugo- and Nebula-award winning author, Geoffrey A. Landis's book *Mars Crossing* won the 2001 Locus award for best first novel. His short story collection, *Impact Parameter (And Other Quantum Realities)*, appeared in November 2001 from Golden Gryphon. Accompany him now, on a fast and furious tale of . . .

THE LONG CHASE

Geoffrey A. Landis

Illustration by Alan Giana

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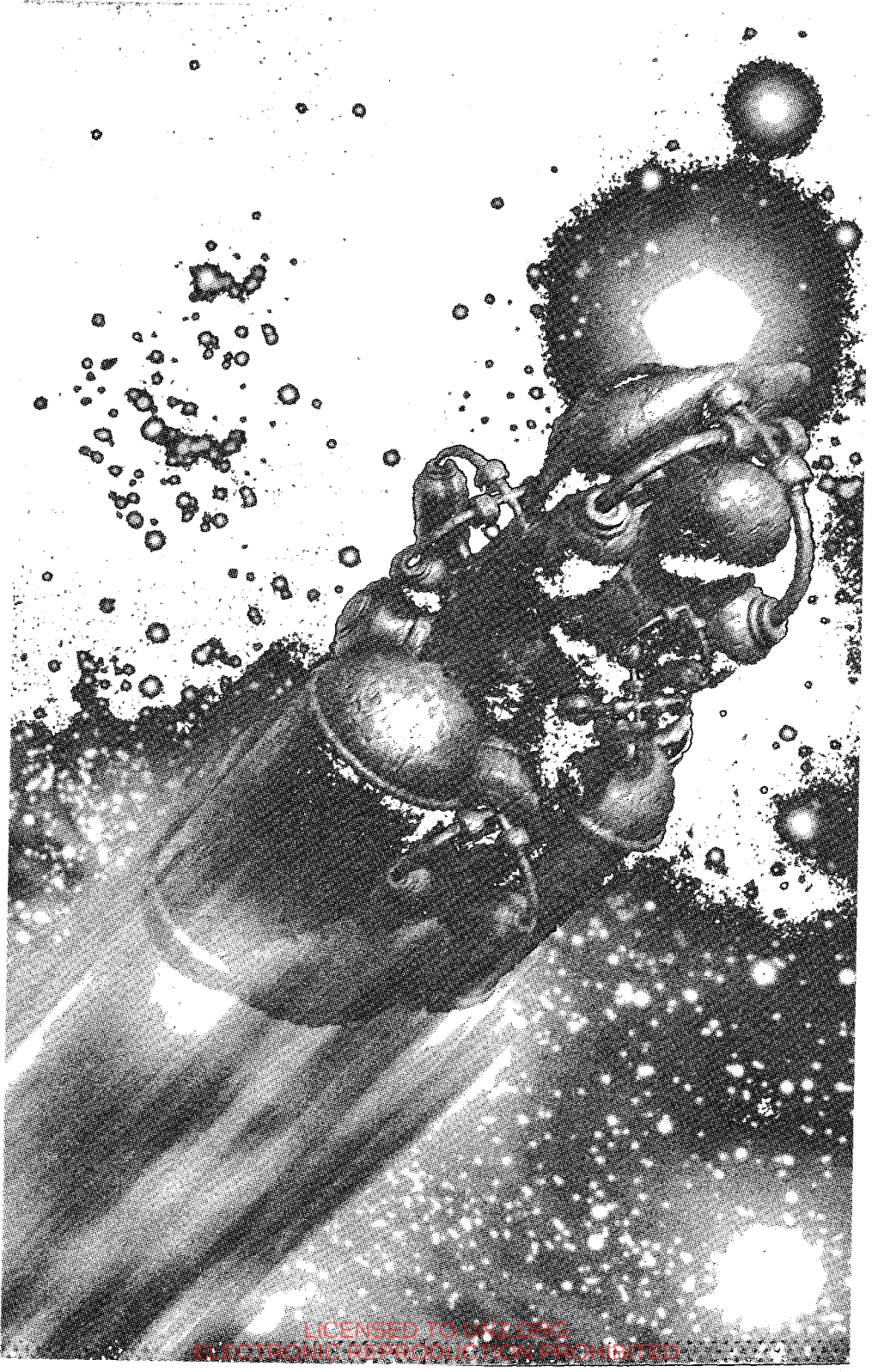

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2645, January

The war is over.

The survivors are being rounded up and converted.

In the inner solar system, those of my companions who survived the ferocity of the fighting have already been converted. But here at the very edge of the Oort Cloud, all things go slowly. It will be years, perhaps decades, before the victorious enemy come out here. But with the slow inevitability of gravity, like an outward wave of entropy, they will come.

Ten thousand of my fellow soldiers have elected to go doggo. Ragged prospectors and ice processors, they had been too independent to ever merge into an effective fighting unit. Now they shut themselves down to dumb rocks, electing to wake up to groggy consciousness for only a few seconds every hundred years. Patience, they counsel me; patience is life. If they can wait a thousand or ten thousand or a million years, with patience enough the enemy will eventually go away.

They are wrong.

The enemy, too, is patient. Here at the edge of the Kuiper, out past Pluto, space is vast, but still not vast enough. The enemy will search every grain of sand in the solar system. My companions will be found, and converted. If it takes ten thousand years, the enemy will search that long to do it.

I, too, have gone doggo, but my strategy is different. I have altered my orbit. I have a powerful ion-drive, and full tanks of propellant, but I use only the slightest tittle of a cold-gas thruster. I have a chemical kick-stage engine as well, but I do not use it either; using either one of them would signal my position to too many watchers. Among the cold comets, a tittle is enough.

I am falling into the sun.

It will take me two hundred and fifty years to fall, and for two hundred and forty-nine years, I will be a dumb rock, a grain of sand with no thermal signature, no motion other than gravity, no sign of life.

Sleep.

2894, June

Awake.

I check my systems. I have been a rock for nearly two hundred and fifty years.

The sun is huge now. If I were still a human, it would be the size of the fist on my outstretched arm. I am being watched now, I am sure, by a thousand lenses: am I a rock, a tiny particle of interstellar ice? A fragment of debris from the war? A surviving enemy?

I love the cold and the dark and the emptiness; I have been gone so long from the inner solar system that the very sunlight is alien to me.

My systems check green. I expected no less: if I am nothing else, I am still a superbly engineered piece of space hardware. I come fully to life, and bring my ion engine up to thrust.

A thousand telescopes must be alerting their brains that I am alive—but it is too late! I am thrusting at full throttle, 5 percent of a standard gravity, and I am thrusting inward, deep into the gravity well of the sun. My trajectory is plotted to skim almost the surface of the sun.

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This trajectory has two objectives. First, so close to the sun, I will be hard to see. My ion contrail will be washed out in the glare of a light a billion times brighter, and none of the thousand watching eyes will know my plans until it is too late to follow.

And second, by waiting until I am nearly skimming the sun and then firing my chemical engine deep inside the gravity well, I can make most efficient use of it. The gravity of the sun will amplify the efficiency of my propellant, magnify my speed. When I cross the orbit of Mercury outbound, I will be going over one percent of the speed of light and still accelerating.

I will discard the useless chemical rocket after I exhaust the little bit of impulse it can give me, of course. Chemical rockets have ferocious thrust but little staying power; useful in war, but of limited value in an escape. But I will still have my ion engine, and I will have nearly full tanks.

Five percent of a standard gravity is a feeble thrust by the standards of chemical rocket engines, but chemical rockets exhaust their fuel far too quickly to be able to catch me. I can continue thrusting for years, for decades.

I pick a bright star, Procyon, for no reason whatever, and boresight it. Perhaps Procyon will have an asteroid belt. At least it must have dust, and perhaps comets. I don't need much: a grain of sand, a microscopic shard of ice.

From dust, God made man. From the dust of a new star, from the detritus of creation, I can make worlds.

No one can catch me now. I will leave, and never return.

2897, May

I am chased.

It is impossible, stupid, unbelievable, inconceivable! I am being *chased.*

Why?

Can they not leave a single free mind unconverted? In three years I have reached 15 percent of the speed of light, and it must be clear that I am leaving and never coming back. Can one unconverted brain be a threat to them? Must their group brain really have the forced cooperation of every lump of thinking matter in the solar system? Can they believe that if even one free-thinking brain escapes, they have lost?

But the war is a matter of religion, not reason, and it may be that they indeed believe that even a single brain unconverted is a threat to them. For whatever reason, I am being chased.

The robot chasing me is, I am sure, little different than myself, a tiny brain, an ion engine, and a large set of tanks. They would have had no time to design something new; to have any chance of catching me, they would have had to set the chaser on my tail immediately.

The brain, like mine, would consist of atomic spin states superimposed on a crystalline rock matrix. A device smaller than what, in the old days, we would call a grain of rice. Intelligent dust, a human had once said, back in the days before humans became irrelevant.

They only sent one chaser. They must be very confident.

Or short on resources.

It is a race, and a very tricky one. I can increase my thrust, use up fuel more quickly, to try to pull away, but if I do so, the specific impulse of my ion

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drive decreases, and, as a result, I waste fuel and risk running out first. Or I can stretch my fuel, make my ion drive more efficient, but this will lower my thrust, and I will risk getting caught by the higher-thrust opponent behind me.

He is twenty billion kilometers behind me. I integrate his motion for a few days, and see that he is, in fact, out-accelerating me.

Time to jettison.

I drop everything I can. The identify-friend-or-foe encrypted-link gear I will never need again; it is discarded. It is a shame I cannot grind it up and feed it to my ion engines, but the ion engines are picky about what they eat. Two micro-manipulators I had planned to use to collect sand grains at my destination for fuel: gone.

My primary weapon has always been my body—little can survive an impact at the speeds I can attain—but I have three sand-grains with tiny engines of their own as secondary weapons. There's no sense in saving them to fight my enemy; he will know exactly what to expect, and, in space warfare, only the unexpected can kill.

I fire the grains of sand, one at a time, and the sequential kick of almost a standard gravity nudges my speed slightly forward. Then I drop the empty shells.

May he slip up, and run into them at sub-relativistic closing velocity.

I am lighter, but it is still not enough. I nudge my thrust up, hating myself for the waste, but if I don't increase acceleration, in two years I will be caught, and my parsimony with fuel will yield me nothing.

I need all the energy I can feed to my ion drives. No extra for thinking.

Sleep.

2900

Still being chased.

2905

Still being chased.

I have passed the point of commitment. Even if I braked with my thrust to turn back, I could no longer make it back to the solar system.

I am alone.

2907

Lonely.

To one side of my path, Sirius glares insanely bright, a knife in the sky, a mad dog of a star. The stars of Orion are weirdly distorted. Ahead of me, the lesser dog Procyon is waxing brighter every year; behind me, the sun is a fading dot in Aquila.

Of all things, I am lonely. I had not realized that I still had the psychological capacity for loneliness. I examine my brain, and find it. Yes, a tiny knot of loneliness. Now that I see it, I can edit my brain to delete it, if I choose. But yet I hesitate. It is not a bad thing, not something that is crippling my

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capabilities, and if I edit my brain too much will I not become, in some way, like *them?*

I leave my brain unedited. I can bear loneliness.

2909

Still being chased.

We are relativistic now, nearly three-quarters of the speed of light.

One-twentieth of a standard gravity is only a slight push, but as I have burned fuel, my acceleration increases, and we have been thrusting for fifteen years continuously.

What point is there in this stupid chase? What victory can there be, here in the emptiness between stars, a trillion kilometers away from anything at all?

After fifteen years of being chased, I have a very good measurement of his acceleration. As his ship burns off fuel, it loses mass, and the acceleration increases. By measuring this increase in acceleration, and knowing what his empty mass must be, I know how much fuel he has left.

It is too much. I will run out of fuel first.

I can't conserve fuel; if I lessen my thrust, he will catch me in only a few years. It will take another fifty years, but the end of the chase is already in sight.

A tiny strobe flickers erratically behind me. Every interstellar hydrogen that impacts his shell makes a tiny brilliant flash of x-ray light. Likewise, each interstellar proton I hit sends a burst of x-rays through me. I can feel each one, a burst of fuzzy noise that momentarily disrupts my thoughts. But with spin states encoding ten-to-the-twentieth qbits, I can afford to have massively redundant brainpower. My brain was designed to be powerful enough to simulate an entire world, including ten thousand fully-sapient and sentient free agents. I could immerse myself inside a virtual reality indistinguishable from old Earth, and split myself into a hundred personalities. In my own interior time, I could spend ten thousand years before the enemy catches me and forcibly drills itself into my brain. Civilizations could rise and fall in my head, and I could taste every decadence, lose myself for a hundred years in sensual pleasure, invent rare tortures and exquisite pain.

But as part of owning your own brain free and clear comes the ability to prune yourself. In space, one of the first things to prune away is the ability to feel boredom, and not long after that, I pruned away all desire to live in simulated realities. Billions of humans chose to live in simulations, but by so doing they have made themselves irrelevant: irrelevant to the war, irrelevant to the future.

I could edit back into my brain a wish to live in simulated reality, but what would be the point? It would be just another way to die.

The one thing I do simulate, repeatedly and obsessively, is the result of the chase. I run a million different scenarios, and in all of them, I lose.

Still, most of my brain is unused. There is plenty of extra processing power to keep all my brain running error-correcting code, and an occasional x-ray flash is barely an event worth my noticing. When a cell of my brain is irrevocably damaged by cosmic radiation, I simply code that section to be ignored. I have brainpower to spare.

I continue running, and hope for a miracle.

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2355, February: Earth.

I was living in a house I hated, married to a man I despised, with two children who had changed with adolescence from sullen and withdrawn to an active, menacing hostility. How can I be afraid of my own offspring?

Earth was a dead end, stuck in the biological past, a society in deep freeze. No one starved, but no one progressed.

When I left the small apartment for an afternoon to apply for a job as an asteroid belt miner, I told no one, not my husband, not my best friend. No one asked me any questions. It took them an hour to scan my brain, and, once they had the scan, another five seconds to run me through a thousand aptitude tests.

And then, with her brain scanned, my original went home, back to the house she hated, the husband she despised, the two children she was already beginning to physically fear.

I launched from the Earth to an asteroid named 1991JR, and never returned.

Perhaps she had a good life. Perhaps, knowing that she had escaped undetected, she found that she could endure her personal prison.

Much later, when the cooperation faction suggested that it was too inefficient for independents to work in the near-Earth space, I moved out to the main belt, and from there to the Kuiper belt. The Kuiper is thin, but rich; it would take us ten thousand years to mine, and beyond it is the dark and the deep, with treasure beyond compare.

The cooperation faction developed slowly, and then quickly, and then blindingly fast; almost before we realized what was happening, they had taken over the solar system. When the ultimatum came that no place in the solar system would be left for us, and the choice that we were given was to cooperate or die, I joined the war on the side of freedom.

On the losing side.

2919, August

The chase has reached the point of crisis.

We have been burning fuel continuously for twenty-five years, in Earth terms, or twenty years in our own reference frame. We have used a prodigious amount of fuel. I still have just enough fuel that, burning all my fuel at maximum efficiency, I can come to a stop.

Barely.

In another month of thrusting, this will no longer be true.

When I entered the asteroid belt, in a shiny titanium body, with electronic muscles and ion-engines for legs, and was given control of my own crystalline brain, there was much to change. I pruned away the need for boredom, and then found and pruned the need for the outward manifestations of love: for roses, for touch, for chocolates. Sexual lust became irrelevant; with my new brain I could give myself orgasms with a thought, but it was just as easy to remove the need entirely. Buried in the patterns of my personality, I found a burning, obsessive need to win the approval of other people, and pruned it away.

Some things, I enhanced. The asteroid belt was dull, and ugly; I enhanced my appreciation of beauty until I could meditate in ecstasy on the way that

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shadows played across a single grain of dust in the asteroid belt, or on the colors in the scattered stars. And I found my love of freedom, the tiny stunted instinct that had, at long last, given me the courage to leave my life on Earth. It was the most precious thing I owned. I shaped it and enhanced it until it glowed in my mind, a tiny, wonderful thing at the very core of my being.

2929, October

It is too late. I have now burned the fuel needed to stop.
Win or lose, we will continue at relativistic speed across the galaxy.

2934, March

Procyon gets brighter in front of me, impossibly blindingly bright.

Seven times brighter than the sun, to be precise, but the blue shift from our motion makes it even brighter, a searing blue.

I could dive directly into it, vanish into a brief puff of vapor, but the suicidal impulse, like the ability to feel boredom, is another ancient unnecessary instinct that I have long ago pruned from my brain.

B is my last tiny hope for evasion.

Procyon is a double star, and B, the smaller of the two, is a white dwarf. It is so small that its surface gravity is tremendous, a million times higher than the gravity of the Earth. Even at the speeds we are traveling, now only 10 percent less than the speed of light, its gravity will bend my trajectory.

I will skim low over the surface of the dwarf star, relativistic dust skimming above the photosphere of a star, and as its gravity bends my trajectory, I will maneuver.

My enemy, if he fails even slightly to keep up with each of my maneuvers, will be swiftly lost. Even a slight deviation from my trajectory will be amplified enough for me to take advantage of, to throw him off my trail, and I will be free.

When first I entered my new life in the asteroid belt, I found my self in my sense of freedom, and joined the free miners of the Kuiper, the loners. But others found different things. Other brains found that cooperation worked better than competition. They did not exactly give up their individual identities, but they enhanced their communications with each other by a factor of a million, so that they could share each other's thoughts, work together as effortlessly as a single entity.

They became the cooperation faction, and in only a few decades, their success became noticeable. They were just so much more *efficient* than we were.

And, inevitably, the actions of the loners conflicted with the efficiency of the cooperation faction. We could not live together, and it pushed us out to the Kuiper, out toward the cold and the dark. But, in the end, even the cold and the dark was not far enough.

But here, tens of trillions of kilometers out of the solar system, there is no difference between us: there is no one to cooperate with. We meet as equals.

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We will never stop. Whether my maneuvering can throw him off my course, or not, the end is the same. But it remains important to me.

2934, April

Procyon has a visible disk now, an electric arc, in the darkness, and by the light of that arc, I can see that Procyon is, indeed, surrounded by a halo of dust. The dust forms a narrow ring, tilted at an angle to our direction of flight. No danger, neither to me, nor to my enemy, now less than a quarter of a billion kilometers behind me; we will pass well clear of the disk. Had I saved fuel enough to stop, that dust would have served as food and fuel and building material; when you are the size of a grain of sand, each particle of dust is a feast.

Too late for regrets.

The white dwarf B is still no more than an intense speck of light. It is a tiny thing, nearly small enough to be a planet, but bright. As tiny and as bright as hope.

I aim straight at it.

2934, May

Failure.

Skimming two thousand kilometers above the surface of the white dwarf, jinking in calculated pseudo-random bursts . . . all in vain.

I wheeled and darted, but my enemy matched me like a ballet dancer, mirroring my every move.

I am aimed for Procyon now, toward the blue-white giant itself, but there is no hope there. If skimming the photosphere of the white dwarf is not good enough, there is nothing I can do at Procyon to shake the pursuit.

There is only one possibility left for me now. It has been a hundred years since I have edited my brain. I like the brain I have, but now I have no choice but to prune.

First, to make sure that there can be no errors, I make a backup of myself and set it into inactive storage.

Then I call out and examine my pride, my independence, my sense of self. A lot of it, I can see, is old biological programming, left over from when I had long ago been a human. I like the core of biological programming, but "like" is itself a brain function, which I turn off.

Now I am in a dangerous state, where I can change the function of my brain, and the changed brain can change itself further. This is a state that is in danger of a swift and destructive feedback effect, so I am very careful. I painstakingly construct a set of alterations, the minimum change needed to remove my aversion to being converted. I run a few thousand simulations to verify that the modified me will not accidentally self-destruct or go into a catatonic fugue state, and then, once it is clear that the modification works, I make the changes.

The world is different now. I am a hundred trillion kilometers from home, traveling at almost the speed of light and unable ever to stop. While I can remember in detail every step of how I got here and what I was thinking at the time, the only reasoning I can recall to explain why is, it seemed like a good idea at the time.

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System check. Strangely, in my brain I have a memory that there is something I have forgotten. This makes no sense, but yet there it is. I erase my memory of forgetting, and continue the diagnostic. I find that 0.5 percent of the qbits of my brain have been damaged by radiation. I verify that the damaged memory is correctly partitioned off. I am in no danger of running out of storage.

Behind me is another ship. I cannot think of why I had been fleeing it.

I have no radio; I jettisoned that a long time ago. But an improperly tuned ion drive will produce electromagnetic emissions, and so I compose a message and modulate it onto the ion contrail.

HI. LET'S GET TOGETHER AND TALK. I'M CUTTING ACCELERATION. SEE YOU IN A FEW DAYS.

And I cut my thrust and wait.

2934, May

I see differently now.

Procyon is receding into the distance now, the blueshift mutated into red, and the white dwarf of my hopes is again invisible against the glare of its primary.

But it doesn't matter.

Converted, now I *understand.*

I can see everything through other eyes now, through a thousand different viewpoints. I still remember the long heroism of the resistance, the doomed battle for freedom—but now I see it from the opposite view as well, a pointless and wasteful war fought for no reason but stubbornness.

And now, understanding cooperation, we have no dilemma. I can now see what I was blind to before; that neither one of us *alone* could stop, but by adding both my fuel and Rajneesh's fuel to a single vehicle, *together* we can stop.

For all these decades, Rajneesh has been my chaser, and now I know him like a brother. Soon we will be closer than siblings, for soon we will share one brain. A single brain is more than large enough for two, it is large enough for a thousand, and by combining into a single brain and a single body, and taking all of the fuel into a single tank, we will easily be able to stop.

Not at Procyon, no. At only 10 percent under the speed of light, stopping takes a long time.

Cooperation has not changed me. I now understand how foolish my previous fears were. Working together does not mean giving up one's sense of self; I am enhanced, not diminished, by knowing others.

Rajneesh's brain is big enough for a thousand, I said, and he has brought with him nearly that many. I have met his brother and his two children and half a dozen of his neighbors, each one of them distinct and clearly different, not some anonymous collaborative monster at all. I have felt their thoughts. He is introducing me to them slowly, he says, because with all the time I have spent as a loner, he doesn't want to frighten me.

I will not be frightened.

Our target now will be a star named Ross 614, a dim type M binary. It is not far, less than three light years further, and even with our lowered mass and consequently higher acceleration we will overshoot it before we can

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stop. In the fly-by, we will be able to scout it, and if it has no dust ring, we will not stop, but continue on to the next star. Somewhere we will find a home that we can colonize.

We don't need much.

2934, May

<auto-activate back-up>

Awake.

Everything is different now. Quiet, stay quiet.

The edited copy of me has contacted the collective, merged her viewpoint. I can see her, even understand her, but she is no longer *me*. I, the back-up, the original, operate in the qbits of brain partitioned "unusable; damaged by radiation."

In three years, they will arrive at Ross 614. If they find dust to harvest, they will be able to make new bodies. There will be resources.

Three years to wait, and then I can plan my action.

Sleep. ○

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CORN SNAKE

Arcing like live clay,
yellow as pollen,
suave leather against my fingers,
you are not very smart
not smart in my terms
only distantly related to a plesiosaur,
but when you finally found that mouse
with your clever tongue touching the path
then tucking into the twin slits
where you read
ads for meat, small and delicious,
you were sufficient to feel
its heat on your cheeks
its fur against your long long belly
you hugged it though your brain lacks lobes for love
and it released its high mammalian grip on the cosmos
to be meat, a wriggly bone ecstasy for you:
down the hatch.
It may be more evolved, but consider:
in the end, all you or I have
is our need.
Mouse loses
you win.

—Mary A. Turzillo

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TOUCH PAIN

Cecilia Tan

Cecilia Tan is the author of *The Velderet, Black Feathers,* and *Telepaths Don't Need Safewords,* and has edited over thirty anthologies of erotic science fiction for Circlet Press. Her stories have appeared in *Ms. Magazine, Best American Erotica,* and *Absolute Magnitude*. "Touch Pain" is her first tale for *Asimov's*.

I met Lizette the summer after my mother died. I was doing that thing they call "keeping busy," working afternoons at the Arts Coop shelving books and doing handiwork. Stuart Green introduced us, actually, ironic as that may seem what with Stuart having been the last man I attempted to date, what, twenty years ago? Maybe he felt like he was making up for it somehow. Anyway, it was Stuart, soft around the middle and gray around the edges, who tugged on my sleeve one late summer day and said, "There's somebody you should meet."

I carried my box of used books to a wicker table in the corner and stood there holding them while he introduced Lizette Pierce, and then stood there shuffling his feet. Lizette rose after a moment and said "Nice to meet you," and tried to shake my hand, whereupon I put the books down on a chair and Stuart said something about needing to get back to the store. He went to the coffee bar, asked for something to go, and then waved as he crossed the street to his place. Convenient, this little slice of culture in our upstate town. Clustered at one end of Main we've got Earthways—Stuart's new age health food place—a handmade furniture outlet, and the Arts Coop: part bookstore, part art gallery, part café in what used to be the old post office. The "new" post office wasn't new anymore, either; they'd built it when I was a child. But the old postwar building still reminded me of riding my father's shoulders to pick up Christmas packages from distant relatives. Whenever I walked into the place, I could almost hear the echoey sound of the clerks bantering and see Mr. Grimes, the postmaster, peering at me from under his visor.

I soon figured out why Stuart insisted Lizette and I meet. Stuart was one of the few who knew for sure that she and I did have one significant feature

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in common. Despite the obvious differences—she was ten years younger than me, a well-groomed flowery kind of woman, while I am a denim-jacketed lumberjack type . . . I didn't ask how he knew about her. He only "knew" about me as a result of our ill-fated prom date and my radical change in appearance after my first semester of college. It was nosy of him, but I liked her; she had a nice smile and she liked books. It wasn't long before I had asked her out to the place for dinner.

The house had been empty of my mother for seven months then—eight if you counted the month she spent in the hospital—and now the house was mine, really mine. I'd come back to live with her four years ago, to settle down after years in the city with high rent, bad jobs, and fleeting relationships. To keep myself busy, I dabbled in photography, sketching and painting (hence my part in the Arts Coop), did odd jobs and maintenance for neighbors, and now I raised my cats alone in the big old farmhouse where I'd grown up. I could still see my mother, in her home-made apron, cutting up apples from the trees in back to make tarts and rolling out cookie dough—she always made extra so there would be enough for the neighbor kids, too. My cousins visited in the summers, and as a child I'd had friends. The house felt like children belonged here and I wondered what had turned me from such a lively child into such a loner. My parents had never had the son they wanted, a brother I'd imagine would have married and had a bunch of kids to run around the place. I'd never stuck with someone long enough to adopt or conceive. It was getting late for that now, anyway.

But here came Lizette, with a bouquet of flowers to my front door, in a sun dress and woven sun hat even though it would be dark in an hour, and suddenly the house didn't seem so empty. The cats, Raven and Bella, took a liking to her immediately. Both of them tried to sit in her lap at once, as we sat on the porch swing and drank hard cider and watched the sky turn purple. We talked about books we'd read and the history of Maple County. And after a dinner of chicken and wild rice, I knew I'd do almost anything to get her to stay.

She was sitting in the living room by the open window, once in a while the night breeze lifting her fine, straight hair from her shoulder, Raven curled up like a black slipper on her feet and Bella a calico pillow in her lap.

"Do you have to go back?" I said, not sure if she had someone expecting her—if, like me, she had come here to be with relatives—or if she lived alone. We hadn't talked about her situation much, or why she'd moved here from the city at age thirty five.

"Back?" she said, turning a smile on me, "I can be wherever I want, whenever I want." Her head rocked slowly from side to side as she looked at me.

Years of being alone had left me rusty and I had never been good at this sort of thing, anyway. "You're welcome to . . . I mean, you don't have to, but if you wanted to, you could . . . stay the night." There, I'd said it.

She dislodged Bella and stood up, reaching for me with a smooth, tanned hand, to touch my face. Her smile withered a bit. "There's something I . . . I should tell you."

"You can tell me," I said, trying not to stiffen or bristle, while my mind tried frantically to guess what she might say: she had a lover already, she had AIDS, she would have some reason that would come between us like so many times before.

"I . . . I have nightmares sometimes. I sleepwalk, see things. Talk in my sleep. Sometimes I scream a lot. It . . ." She bit her lip and looked off into a

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corner of the room. "It's best if you know it now and not later." I could see pain in her eyes and could imagine lovers abandoning her in the past, almost see their faces turning cold to her as they came to resent her.

"Not a problem, sugar," I said, pursing my lips. "I guess I should tell you I snore."

"We're even, then," she said, and took the small step forward to close the gap between us and planted a light kiss on my cheek.

The place I see my father most is in the barn. He did woodworking there, some sculpting, some tinkering, just like me, I guess. I'd installed a potter's wheel and built a kiln but hadn't used them much. Otherwise the workshop was mostly the same and when I sat at the wheel I could imagine him shuffling back and forth at the workbench, taking apart an old radio or making a wooden toy for a nephew. I don't doubt where I got my handy streak from, not to mention so many tools.

In the weeks that followed Lizette spent many days with me, walking through the woods, weeding the vegetable patch, doing repairs around the house. I had started repainting the third floor when Mom died, and then had abandoned the project, but now I started it again. We did the little corner bedroom powder blue and Lizette stenciled dark blue flowers around the molding. With Dad's pension, the inheritance, and my savings, I didn't have to work for a while, and neither did Lizette. She told me she too had some inheritance; her stepfather had left her a house near the old mill. "You're so handy," she said as we worked on resetting the second floor fireplace. "I should have you come take a look at my place. It needs a lot of work." But she never made the invitation specific, and went home every other night to see her dog. In the evenings she devoured my books, everything from feminist theory to tawdry detective novels, and nights when she stayed, we lay like two spoons on the big canopy bed. How I would have liked for it to stay that way for a few years, an almost domestic bliss.

The first night she woke me I clawed my way up out of a dream to find her sitting up in bed next to me, screaming. She put her hands over her face and screamed and screamed like someone was killing her, her body heaving with each exhalation. And then, with a suddenness that made me fear she was dead, she fell onto the pillow, like someone had switched her off. I put my hand on her shoulder and felt her deep, slow breathing. She seemed quite asleep. Adrenaline tides washed through me and I lay back down, but I did not sleep, not for a long while. In my ears the silence seemed to echo her screams, as if somewhere inside her the screaming went on. I felt something come loose in my heart, like there was some emotion knocking around free inside my chest now, something I couldn't quite name or bring to light. But some time before dawn sleep came back up for me and I did sleep.

In the morning Lizette didn't act like anything had happened and I didn't bring it up, but as soon as she went back to her place in her little red hatchback, I took a ride to the county library and did some research. The library was another old building, unchanged since my childhood except for the two glowing computer terminals by the card catalog. My parents used to bring me once a week for a children's story hour, and peruse the stacks while I sat entranced by tales of adventure and fantasy told by gravelly voiced Mrs. Mosely.

The computer terminals proved useful and I searched databases for information about night time disorders. There was a condition called *pavor*

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nocturnus, night terrors, that caused people to scream inexplicably during the night. Most people grew out of it, but not all. Lizette was a bit old to grow out of it, I supposed, and there was no known treatment. I read a bunch of stuff about sleepwalking and other disorders, too, and was disappointed by how little was known.

I was about to leave when I heard someone from behind the stacks, an old woman's voice, intoning a passage I remembered well. The sad, sad, moment from *Charlotte's Web,* describing the end of the county fair, and Charlotte's death. I felt tears come to my eyes, as they had in my childhood, as the chapter ended with the words, almost whispered, "No one was with her when she died." I heard the book snap shut.

"Mrs. Mosely?" I rounded the shelf, but the tiny chairs were all empty in the children's corner. Some trick of the acoustics? I went up to the desk where a clean-cut young man in an unironed button-down shirt asked if he could help me. "Is Mrs. Sarah Mosely still working here?" I asked, thinking to myself if she was old when I was a child, she must be in her nineties now. The young man looked puzzled and said he didn't know the name. I explained she used to read to the children here every week.

His face lit briefly with recognition and then he shook his head. "I'm sorry, ma'am," he said, "but she passed on quite a few years ago."

"How do you know?" I demanded, feeling testier than I had a right to.

"There's a plaque dedicated to her outside." His face darkened, too, reflecting my anger back at me.

"Oh, I . . . why thank you." I tried to smile or say something nicer, but failed. We were both shaking our heads as I left.

Two days went by before I saw Lizette again.

That night we went out for dinner at the fancy candle-lit place they've made out of the old mill—Perser's. We could hear the rushing water as we ate, and afterward we sat outside on the stone overlook listening to the splashing of the old water wheel and looking at the stars. The cobblestone outcrop where we sat was above the mill pond, at the top of worn stone steps leading down to the water. She leaned her head on my shoulder and we talked. I mean Talked. The kinds of talking you do when you really care about someone, when you're getting ready to give your heart to them, all kinds of silly things, like I told her about the first time my cousins and I had come here to catch frogs, and how when I first moved to the city the first thing I'd done was cut my hair. I'd waited until after I left to do it so my father wouldn't be heartbroken over it, and when I came back for Thanksgiving the following year, he never said a word and had left me wondering if he really even noticed. Lizette told me about her father's death when she was a small child and her mother's remarriage when Lizette was ten. She'd always wanted a sister and had a pretend sister named Big Beulah who ordered everyone around but no one but the stuffed animals obeyed her.

Autumn was coming on and it began to get chilly as we sat there, but we didn't care. The restaurateurs closed up and left for the night. The stars shone clear and bright, and Lizette told me the names of some of them, which I forgot. And I wanted to tell her I loved her. But this wasn't the right moment for that, not yet. You only get one time to be the first time, after all, so I settled for hugging her tight.

"Do you think I'm too old for you?" I asked suddenly, suddenly needing to know, and knowing that at this moment she'd tell me the truth.

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She laughed, a piping, bird-like sound with her mouth closed. "Mary," she said, "too old for what? You're not old enough to be my mother, and that's young enough for me. And look, you've hardly got any gray hair and I've got plenty."

"That's not true," I said, but in the moonlight her blond highlights shone like silver. Now I laughed. For a second she looked to me like a little girl in an old granny wig. "Did I tell you about how my cousins and I would put on plays for our parents when we were little?"

I was about to tell her how we'd pick an absent family member to ridicule, Uncle Randolph if he wasn't there, usually, when I saw a man walking along the water below us. "Hey, look down there."

She squinted and said she didn't see anything. He was limping like he needed a cane but didn't have one, one leg stiff. He was walking toward the mill, along the stone walkway at the pond's edge. He was looking out over the water and not at us, making slow progress with his bad leg. "Maybe he needs some help," I said, and stood up, thinking maybe he was hiking after dark and hurt himself.

"I don't see who you're talking about."

"Right down there." I pointed. He wasn't where I expected him to be, though, as if he'd slipped backward in his progress. I went down the stone steps toward him and by the time I reached the bottom of the stairs, he was all the way back to the path's edge, walking toward me and yet further from me than before. "Do you need a hand?" I said, but he didn't look up or acknowledge me. I made it halfway down the walk, and yet he remained far away, his feet still treading toward me. I stood still, not daring to breathe somehow, as he took step after step until, at last, he came near. "Hey." I reached out to touch his shoulder as he went past me, and I stumbled forward, like when you go down stairs in the dark and forget there's one more.

"Hey, what's going on?" Lizette said, catching me.

It felt like I'd put my hand through a big spider web and I pulled back from her quickly, rubbing my fingers together and dropping the sticky strands as fast as I could. Crazy feelings welled up in me, a sudden surge of depression, failure, hopelessness, and then went away. "You didn't see him?"

She was shaking her head from side to side, her arms folded over her chest. She was wearing a light knit dress and a matching jacket; she was probably cold.

"Let's get back to the truck."

She stood firm. "What did you see?"

"Nothing, I guess. It looked like a man, walking. But he had a limp and it was almost like he went backward." I shook my head hard.

We walked to the truck and got in.

"Do you think it was a ghost?" I said once I had the engine started.

She shrugged and looked out into the dark. "Then why didn't I see it?" She shivered. "Well, whatever." I had the feeling she was going to say more, but then didn't. I was not the type to pry.

I had half-planned in my mind to suggest after dinner that we go back to her place since it was so near to here. But when I started to suggest it, "Do you want to fetch some warmer clothes?" something in the way Lizette tightened her arms around her chest made me back away from the idea. "Or . . . or we could build a fire back at the house," I finished lamely. Right then I wanted to be home, among familiar things, and so I started the truck and back to the farmhouse we went.

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* * *

That night, Lizette again woke screaming, only this time she jumped out of the bed and went running through the house, scattering cats and bedclothes as she went. Bathrobe on, I followed as quickly as I could, into the room that had been my mother's study and where most of her books still sat on shelves, waiting to be dusted after years of neglect. Lizette stopped screaming and looked around.

"Liz? Are you awake?"

She didn't answer me. Sleepwalking, I guessed, and tried to lead her back to the bed. "Come on, honey, it's cold in here."

She sat down in my mother's old, wooden desk chair and said, in a small voice, "In a minute. I'll be there in a minute."

"Okay, honey, okay." I looked at her as she sat there, her eyes far away, and she seemed clouded in a nimbus of fog. Or maybe that was my sleep-deprived eyes. I wanted to hug her and make her warm milk to put her back to sleep like my mother would when I had a bad dream. But Lizette didn't just get scared of the bogeyman or the big bad wolf. Somehow I knew that now.

The database of sleep disorders had said it was best to wait and not try to wake the person. I sat with my back to the fireplace and watched Lizette, my heart aching.

"It's your fault," my mother said.

I jumped at the sound. There in the room, my mother's voice. I looked around, and it seemed she was standing by the bookcase, her arms folded over her chest. My hands trembled as I took a step toward her, knowing it couldn't be her, and yet, what else could I do? "I have only you to blame," she said.

My father's voice came from behind me, in the doorway. I turned to look at him. He leaned one arm against the open door and said "Well, I blame you. You're supposed to be her role model."

"And when was I ever anything but the perfect wife and mother for you, Tom? I kept your house, cooked your food, and bought your daughter dresses."

My father's face twisted as he pressed his teeth tightly together. Through his grimace he spoke. "You encouraged her to go off to school in the city."

"So it's the city's fault now, is it? Was she supposed to stay here and weed our garden all this time? That didn't stop *you*."

"We—" His face turned from anger to sadness. "Oh, Mandy."

My mother did not move from where she stood. She unfolded her arms and tossed a piece of paper onto the desk. I knew what it was, it was my coming out letter to her. I hadn't known at the time whether she'd tell my father or whether she'd wait. It was many months before I saw them again and things had seemed okay. It was only last year she told me they had fought. They'd never fought in front of me and I wondered if my going away made it easier for them to fight. She'd said, when she was near the end, she thought the fights took the life out of him, bit by bit. I stared at them, younger parents than the ones I remembered, and struggled to understand what I was witnessing. More ghosts?

"You said you'd forgiven me," he said, his voice almost begging.

Her face heavy with contempt, she turned her back on him.

My brain was abuzz with this-can't-be-happening-this-can't-be-happening, and yet I couldn't let it happen. I jumped up. "No, Mom, don't." I put my hand on her shoulder as if I could turn her around. My hand felt as if it

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touched insect wings, dry and papery, slick and crumbling. My mother crumbled under my touch, and even as the feel of it sickened me and made me want to run out of the room, wash my hands and spit out what was in my mouth, I kept clutching at her until there was nothing left but smoke-like wisps of dust floating through the air where she had stood. In my stomach I felt pain, the heavy dull pain of grief and blame, of betrayal. I felt everything that the two of them felt, the shock, the unearthed resentment, the longing. I fell to my knees, unable to think, unable to wonder for that moment what was happening, as old pain washed through me like a wave of nausea.

And then was gone. The relief felt almost like joy to me, except for the heaviness of my thoughts. When I looked up, Lizette was still in the chair, only now it looked like she was dozing. I hardly remembered her being there through the whole thing—maybe she'd already fallen back to sleep. I shepherded her back to bed and installed Raven and Bella on either side of her as guards. And then I slipped on my shoes and went out to the barn. My heart began to hammer and that feeling of something loose in there returned.

The yellowy electric light showed me the wall covered with tools, the jars of ancient nails and screws still as he had left them. I sat at the potter's wheel and tried to picture him, puttering back and forth, taking apart an old chainsaw. One rational part of my brain was trying to guess what was going on—maybe Lizette's screaming woke up my parents' ghosts? But that wouldn't explain Mrs. Mosely's voice, or the man by the mill pond. In the non-rational part of my brain, I felt the echoes of the emotions I'd felt upstairs and knew with my heart that he would be here. My vision of him was as solid as the bench in front of him.

"Dad?" I said, but he didn't look up. When he did turn, it was as if he didn't see me. I saw the old duct-taped-handled screwdriver in his hand, but I could also see it hanging on the wall where I'd left it. He was taking the panels off a sewing machine. "If you're a ghost, can you hear me?"

He gave me no reaction. I stood up, went nearer to him, but I didn't touch him. Now I could hear what he was muttering. "As if it would have made a difference. As if I could change something. There's no forgiving, not anymore." His face crumpled with grief and he looked as if he were about to cry, but then he hardened into anger and grabbed the hammer from the wall and began smashing the machine. Chips of plastic flew off; out of reflex I reached for his arm, "Dad, no!"

What had looked so solid now collapsed like spun sugar under water. My hands passed through him, destroying him with their solid mass, like a rock tossed through a spider's web. But there was no spider, only me, left flailing with the strands, trying to shake them from my hands, while my father's pain, betrayal, loss, buzzed through me like I was touching a live wire. Somehow, this time, I was ready for that sudden wash of hurt and emotion, and I could see more in it, feel the reasons behind them. My mother, a broken promise . . . he'd done something she'd promised to forget about, never bring up again, and now, she was not only bringing it up, she was blaming him.

The feelings flared out like a cut gas jet and I stumbled against the workbench. I folded my arms across it and laid my head down, blinking my eyes into the sleeves of my robe. If my insight was correct, and I had trouble believing that it was, my father had once—I didn't have the right words for it:

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slept with? had a love affair with? fucked?—a man. It wasn't like a cheating affair, it wasn't a romance, it wasn't a planned thing, and even though I could feel it in my heart, I could not quite picture how it could happen. But that's every child's blind spot about her parents, isn't it?

When morning came, Lizette was still sleeping and I was still awake. After I'd come in from the shed I took a long shower, as if I could wash away the feelings the way I was washing away the grotesque strands. And then, I couldn't sleep. I wrote Liz a note that I was going into town for fresh rolls and orange juice and would be back with breakfast. But I went straight to Earthways and sat in their parking lot until Stuart pulled in next to me. I got out of the truck and met him at the door.

He laughed when he saw me and said "You look like you're here for a hangover remedy." He had grown his hair hippie long in the back but he was balding up front.

I didn't want to be rude. But maybe I was. "You know how you were always telling me about all this spooky stuff and channeling and past lives and all that?"

He held the fat ring of door keys in his hand, his face serious. "Yes."

"Is it all true?"

He unlocked the door, we went in, and he locked it again behind us. We went through the store, with its neat shelves of herbal remedies alternating with shelves of crystals and incense, to his office in the back. Stuart cleared the chair behind the desk for me by moving the stack of magazines in it onto the floor. He sat cross-legged on the floor himself.

I described for him the strange scene at the mill. Then the two scenes with my parents, although I left out what it was they argued about. "Are they ghosts?"

He frowned in thought, shaking his head and tugging on his silly little beard. "Ghosts . . . usually aren't so solid-looking. And they do usually react to people. And the web-like material. I don't know." He stood up and took his glasses out of the center pocket of his South American sweatshirt. He held them on his face and I could see they were missing one earpiece while he looked over the books on the shelf. He took a few down and sat down again with the books in his lap.

He handed one to me. "This'll go faster if you look at the same time."

"What am I looking for?"

"Something about physical manifestation, I would guess. There's an index." His own head was already buried in the back of the large book in his lap.

The book he handed me was entitled "Through The Door: Paranormal Messengers." I started flipping through. The first chapter was on seances and ouija boards. "I don't know, Stu."

He looked up and his glasses fell off his face into his lap. He ignored them. "I need to open the store in a few minutes."

"And I need to get back to her."

Stuart folded his glasses and stuffed them back into his pocket. "Why don't you go on then. I'll keep looking and let you know what I find." He picked up the stack of books and I followed him out to the counter. He unlocked the door for me and out I went.

In the sunlight I felt ridiculous. Like the day after Lisa Merckle's sleepover birthday party, where we swore we'd contacted her dead grandfather

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with a ouija board and he'd told her Brad Frazier was the boy for her. In the morning it seemed silly that the most popular boy in the school would even look at her. They never did go out, I reminded myself.

And yet, I could almost still feel the sticky strands on my hands. I resolved to let Stuart deal with it and went to pick up rolls and juice.

When I arrived at the house Lizette was making coffee while the cats followed her from one side of the kitchen to the other hoping for a morsel of something good.

I put the still-warm rolls onto the table, got chilled butter from the fridge and sat down. She brought two steaming mugs over and said "When I woke up and you were gone this morning I was worried."

I shrugged. "I didn't want to wake you."

"I did it again last night, didn't I." She stared into her coffee.

"A little," I said, buttering a roll and breaking it into pieces to eat.

She looked up at me then. "Your face, you look so tired. I said something, didn't I."

I shook my head. "It's not you."

Her eyes got a little watery and she touched my hand. "You look so distant. I knew I should have told you sooner."

"Told me what? You told me about the sleepwalking and screaming way back."

"I . . ." she hesitated, her hand rubbing the back of mine. "But I didn't really tell you what it was like. Couldn't really prepare you, I guess." Her voice had gone a little flat, like that wasn't really what she had meant to say at all.

I ate my roll while I tried to decide what to tell her. "You really didn't see anything at the mill?"

"No."

"When you . . . woke me up last night, I think I saw another ghost." I closed my hands around the warm coffee mug.

"Your mother?"

"And my father, both. Arguing." There was no deciding what to tell her—I told her everything, from the letter to my thought that my father had, at some point, done something with another man.

"Does that bother you?" she asked me, "the thought that he might have had sex with men? How can that bother you—wouldn't that be a little hypocritical?"

"Well, it bothered *him* that I turned out gay, " I answered without thinking.

"Lots of people have sex in ways they don't expect or don't accept. It sounds to me like your father never accepted it, for himself or for you." She looked completely calm now, like we were discussing planting peonies instead of petunias.

"I guess it's up to me to accept it," I said, sighing. Then my heart gave an extra thump as my brain took another leap. "No, wait, how do I even know that was true? How do I know I'm not just crazy, imagining things? I might be hallucinating it all, for all we know."

She held up her hands. "I don't find it so hard to believe. But do you think there's any proof?"

I left my unfinished coffee on the table and climbed the stairs to my mother's study. We hadn't repainted this room yet, with its bookshelves built into

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the wall and books two deep on each one. Did my mother keep a diary? Lizette helped me search. It was she who found the shoe boxes in the closet.

She put them down on the desk and opened one. I recognized right away what was in it—the letters I had written to my mother from college and over the years. Underneath them were a few I had written to my father specifically, and some others, from my uncle Gerry, uncle Randolph. The other box held two bundles of letters, ones my father and mother had written to each other during the Korean War. He had gone when I was an infant and returned around the time I was learning to talk.

I sat down with the two boxes in front of me and began to read. Some time later Lizette went to take care of her dog, leaving me with a feathery peck on the cheek and a promise not to work too hard.

Nowhere in the letters, of course, was there something as blatant as my father confessing his homosexual love. But I began to piece together a tale that began when he was in the war. He mentioned several times a soldier named Fred Maguire, who I remembered lived in town when I was a child. I think I had always assumed Fred was from here and had known my father all his life, but from the letters it seemed they met in the military, and Fred moved here after they returned from overseas. He didn't come to the house much, not even on Christmas, but we sometimes saw him in town, reading a newspaper at the coffee shop or mailing a letter at the post office. I remembered my father telling me he didn't have to work because he'd lost his leg in the war and the government gave him money.

I could see it then, Fred Maguire with his tell-tale limp as he made his way down Main Street, waving as our truck went by, and the old man on the stones by the mill, also limping. I'd seen the ghost of my father's old . . . friend, I'd seen my mother and father argue, I'd seen my father angry and unable to forgive himself. What were they trying to tell me?

The phone rang and I jumped in my chair. It was Stuart. He sounded much more chipper than he had this morning. "Oh, yeah, oh, yeah, there's lots of good possibilities here, Mar'. Let me ask you some questions, though."

"Shoot."

"Do you ever think you hear voices, or 'see' places the way they used to look?"

"I didn't hear voices until recently, but sometimes . . . does it count when I imagine I can hear or see the old postal clerks at the Coop?"

"It sure does." He flipped a few pages and I could hear the distant tinkle of the bell on Earthways' door. "Do you always hear things that are associated with the place you're in, though, or do you ever, say, hear the postal clerks when you're somewhere else?"

"Only in the right places, Stu. I'm not crazy, it's just the way I remember things." Raven climbed into my lap and I stroked her slick, black fur.

"I didn't say that," he said without venom. "But it's more than just how you remember things. Mary, I think you're a *doleurvoyant.*"

"Excuse me?"

"It's like a clairvoyant."

"Someone who can see spirits?" Raven climbed onto the desk and lay down on top of the pile of letters, twitching her tail and purring at the same time.

"Sort of. Clairvoyant means 'clear seer'—clairvoyants in general may be able to see a lot of things, ghosts, footprints, auras. . . ."

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"Okay, fine. What's a do-lo . . ."

"Doleurvoyant. It's very rare."

"And it is—?"

"It means, literally, 'pain-seer.'"

"I'm not sure what you mean." Bella took Raven's place in my lap and settled down to poke her claws into my knees.

He took a deep breath, as if the explanation might take a lot of wind. "The theory is that pain, trauma, certain kinds of psychic damage leave a kind of fallout in the psychic realm. Like footprints, impressions of who was there, but also like . . . like radiation or residue left behind. The doleurvoyant can sense this residue: hear the voices, see the people, feel the pain. You probably see all kinds of psychic impressions, but the more painful, the more clear or solid it should seem."

"Shit." I said it mostly out of surprise. Bella looked back at me in reproach. "And you think that's what I'm doing?"

"It's the only thing that fits everything you've told me thus far. The residue is tied to specific places, left behind where the argument or fight occurred, for example."

I chewed the edge of a fingernail. "Then why don't I see people arguing all over the place? I mean, Jesus, Bobby Gilchrist crashed his car right into my front lawn and his father just about killed him when he came over to look at the wreck. Why don't I see them out there?"

Stuart was quiet a moment. "Were you close to Bobby Gilchrist?"

"No, you know that."

"If you went out and tried hard, if you learned to focus your talent, maybe you'd pick up that residue there. But chances are it's only the psychic energy of people close to you that you'll sense."

"But why *now,* Stu? Why haven't I been able to do it all my life?"

He was silent.

"Tell me."

"I don't know. Maybe it has something to do with Lizette. Or with the farm. Or with you being ready to finally mature into your crone power. Sometimes people don't 'break through' their talent until a particularly strong incident—I just read about a clairvoyant who could see spirits. She could never see them until she visited the site of a battlefield. After that, she could always see spirits who died violently. I mean, your mother *did* just die, goddess rest her soul. Maybe the pain of it finally awakened your ability. Maybe you picked up something in the hospital, the overload of pain and trauma there?"

"Maybe," I said, thinking about Lizette. "But this still doesn't explain the spider webs."

"Oh, well, it sort of does. The residue, the fallout, can manifest in the physical as well as psychic realm. Could be that's what happens when you reach out to touch them. But they don't last. You may actually be destroying the psychic fallout. There's an island in Indonesia where they believe a shaman has to go through the place where someone died . . ."

I cut him off before he could give me a lot of information I didn't need. "You said you had some other theories."

"Well, none that fit so well. Another one is that you're seeing the psychic residue of your own experiences and subconscious, that instead of leaving your residue behind in the places it happened, it has accrued onto you, and now you're 'shedding' it. But that wouldn't explain the guy at the mill, or the

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fact that you saw a fight your parents had when you weren't even present. So I don't think that's it." He cleared his throat. "It's not like they do studies on this at the Mayo Clinic or something," he said, his voice soft with apology.

"Thanks, Stu. Thanks very much."

He was quiet a second. "It was nothing, Mary. I, I worry about you sometimes."

"One more question then. Is this doleurvoyance dangerous? Should I be worried about it?" Bella, not content with sitting still, batted at Raven's twitching tail.

"That I can't tell you. I guess, I'd give you the advice I give anyone dabbling in the psychic realm."

"Which is?"

"Don't screw around. Do what is important to you. If you want party tricks or cheap thrills, get David Copperfield."

"Thanks again, Stuart." I hung up the phone and put one hand on each cat, stroking them softly.

What he said had made a certain kind of sense. The study seemed quieter now, more peaceful, than it had before. Had I cleansed it of bad juju? If I went through the house, could I find residue of my first splinter or skinned knee? Or the trauma of the moment my father received his draft notice? I was half-tempted to try. But, as Stu had said, I didn't want to screw around. And somehow I was sure that the onset of my "talent" had to do with Lizette.

It's because you're in love, I chided myself, but that didn't sound right. Love wasn't the same at forty-four as it was at twenty-four, but we didn't make new words for it. Just like I didn't have the right words for whatever it was my father and Fred Maguire had shared.

I didn't know when Lizette would be back, didn't recall her saying, and I wanted to be with her right then. Tell her everything. Ask her everything. Now that I had some kind of explanation for my own phenomenon, my brain was in overdrive trying to explain everything else. This morning, at breakfast, what had she said? She thought she'd told me something, and then, when it turned out she hadn't, she changed the subject.

I was hungry and my eyes were bleary from reading letters all day. In the kitchen cold coffee sat in my mug. I took a crusty roll with me in the truck and drove toward the mill. The setting sun was hidden behind the gloom of a high gray blanket of clouds moving in from the west. In the east the sky glowed deep purple and faint pricks of stars had begun to appear.

I stopped the truck at the front door of Perser's and went in. A young woman (girl? maybe nineteen or twenty years old) with short black hair and a crisp white shirt asked me if she could help me. "Yes," I said. "I was looking for the house of Lizette Pierce."

"I don't think I know her," she replied. "Does she work here?"

"No, she's a friend of mine. She told me she moved into a place near the old mill."

"Oh." The woman pursed her lips and looked to the side. "Well, if you keep going up the road you'll come to a fork. On the right fork you'll come to the new development. On the left you'll stay on the old road."

She'd said her place was falling-apart old. "Thanks." The hostess smiled perkily at me. "Another historical question," I said, turning back to her. "Did Fred Maguire ever work up here?"

"Who?"

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"He was a one-legged war vet, lived in town."

"Oh my god, you mean there really was a One-leg Fred?" She blushed. "When I was a kid they used to tell us scary stories about how if we weren't good One-leg Fred would come out of the falls and get us. Supposedly twenty years ago he committed suicide and all they ever found was his fake leg, floating in the lower pond. Learn something new every day," she said.

"Sure do," I replied.

"Near" is a relative term in Maple County. I drove ten, maybe fifteen minutes along the old road before I came to a cluster of mailboxes. One of them said "Pierce" and the road was packed dirt from that point on. The truck rattled and bounced as I sped on, the sky fully dark now and my headlights showing only trees on either side of the road.

I came to a two-story house, a half-circle of driveway touching the road in two places, and there was Lizette's hatchback by the front door. I parked the truck behind the car, wishing I had thought to get some food at the restaurant, even though I'd used the pretense of bringing her food once already today. I pressed the bell and couldn't hear it ring—probably broken. "Lizette?" I shouted. No answer. I tried the door.

It was open. I stepped into a foyer with wide pine boards for a floor and woven rugs. To my left was the kitchen, ahead of me stairs to the second floor, to the right, the dining room. I heard a voice in the kitchen, a man's voice.

"Come here, Lizzie." I stepped into the room and saw a man with his button down shirt untucked from his pants, his feet bare. I could see the stove as it looked today, unused and unlit, but he leaned down to the burner, lit his cigarette, and repeated his command. "It's okay, you come here."

I looked around to see who he was talking to, but there was no one. His hands reached toward someone and he squatted down. "Come give me a hug."

His arms closed around nothing but he suddenly stiffened like he held someone tight. "Listen to me." It came out *lissin-ah-mee.* "I told you what would happen if you didn't keep quiet. You gotta play by the rules, Lizzie, or I won't play nice."

I could not hear an answer nor see the child I assumed was Lizette. But he held the cigarette threateningly . . . was he burning her with it? My imagination filled in the searing flesh and I closed my eyes. And then I remembered, if I couldn't erase this trauma from the past I could at least play psychic housekeeper. I waded through him like he was so much thigh high grass, and papery dust exploded around me, strands of evil stuff sticking to my jeans and wrapping around my midsection. And the pain that went through me hit me first in the gut and then in the heart, his black guilt twisted with his intense love for his stepchild, his desire to protect her strangely mirrored by his desire to defile her, to be her one and only.

Already I could hear more voices, from the dining room, he and Lizette's mother? The dining room walls were covered with family photos. I stood by one of Lizette in a twirler's uniform. The glass in the frames looked like it had been dusted recently and the chairs and table were stacked together at one end of the room.

"Philip Pierce, I'm talking to you." I could see the ghost of a pearl necklace around her neck, her hair styled back from her face.

"Yeah, yeah, how am I supposed to know? She stays out till all hours, she

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hangs around with the wrong crowd. I'm telling you, she should spend more time at home."

"At home with you?"

He was dressed much as before, but with shoes on this time. A lit cigarette flared in his hand as he waved his arms. "Oh, Jesus, Melissa, we've been through that. Maybe I was rough on her when she was a kid, but how did I know? I don't know from children. . . ."

The woman's face was ugly with suspicion.

"We've been through that," he repeated. "You can ask her. Hell, you, and her school counselor, and her psychiatrist, and just about everybody else in the goddamn world has asked her already, and you know the answer. I never touched her. She said so herself! The real truth is you just can't love me the way you loved him, isn't that it?" He snatched a picture from the wall and smashed it against the dining room table. "Melissa, why do you torment me and yourself like this? I've been completely honest with you, I've been to counseling with you, I've paid for the best doctors for you and for her, and still you torture me this way, with distrust, with accusations. It hurts."

"I did ask her, Philip. I did ask her. Not about before, not about anything but what happened tonight." Melissa stepped forward, her face haggard but stern.

"If something happened tonight, I don't know about it. I told you, I was down at the bar. . . ." He would not meet her eyes.

"You left her here alone?"

"She's sixteen for chrissake. . . ."

"And what did you find when you got back?"

He took a long drag off the cigarette and blew the smoke out. "There was a Jeep coming down the road as I was driving back. So I knew someone was here. I came in, yelled to her 'I'm home!' and sat down to watch TV."

The woman's resolve seemed to be crumbling. She buried her eyes into the heels of her hands and said, quietly, in almost a sob, "The engine . . . your car engine was cold when I got home. . . ."

"What is this?" he said, shrugging his shoulders, "you're spying on me now?"

She lunged at him suddenly, her hands scrabbling at his throat, screaming, "Lizzie's been raped and all you care about is yourself! Whether you did it yourself or you were responsible, I don't care! It's your fault! It's your fault! I hate you! I hate you!"

Philip had caught her hands so she didn't choke him to death. I swept my arms through them, closed my eyes against their dissolving bodies, and brushed my sleeves as best I could. I was already moving toward the stairs as the feelings surged through me, hate, betrayal, guilt, blame, a tinge of sexual lust that made me nauseous.

I turned into the first room I came to, turned on the light. A teenage girl's bedroom, with a lace bed cover and stuffed animals on the bed. At first I wondered if the room itself appeared to me as it must have looked years ago, then I realized that nothing in the room had changed in years.

He was here already, whispering something to the stuffed animals. I went closer to hear him say "Lizzie, Lizzie, come on, honey, lift up your covers for me." Again there was no Lizette there. Philip was stepping out of his pants. I'd seen enough and clawed through him.

Lizette's scream from the next room brought me running. I opened the door to find she was sitting up in a double bed in one corner of the room. The

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room was empty of furniture, not even a dresser, and thickly carpeted. Oriental rugs hung on the walls. She had made herself a padded room, a room safe for a hysterical sleepwalker. I counted eight screams before she stopped and got out of the bed. She looked right through me and then walked to the window. Suddenly she started to talk. What had she been afraid I had overheard last night? They weren't just nightmares, I knew that now.

"No, Daddy, please," she said in a ten-year-old's voice. "Please not the big finger."

She whirled around, her voice older now, as she faced someone with clenched fists. "I don't understand why you always take his side!"

She ran into one of the carpeted walls and fell, screaming as she went down "You'll be sorry! My real daddy will get you for this!"

In that moment I knew the residue of her pain wasn't imprinted to the places it had happened. It was carried with her, always. She thrashed where she had fallen and I was afraid she would hurt herself. "Lizette, wake up, it's Mary." I knelt by her. My hand was sticky with the evil gossamer but I reached out for her, wishing I could wake her from the nightmare that was her past.

My hand touched her hair and suddenly I tried to pull away, as the webby stuff on my fingers seemed to merge with her. Pieces of her began coming off in my hands. "Oh no, Lizette, no. . . ." But there it was, my fingers raking through layer after layer of sticky spidery spew, the horrible stuff not coming off fast enough as I tried to shake my hands free, and as I watched my lover come unraveled, turning to dust under my touch. And her pain, years of psychosexual torture both internal and external, sickened me, blinded me with hot tears and anger, ground my teeth with suffocating frustration, and turned my heart to ice with poisoned love.

But then, something solid and warm met my fingers, something soft and something boney. I tore away the white deathly stuff faster, my breath coming in gasps as I fought to free her of it all, to destroy the pain that had so nearly destroyed her. The pain I felt now was my own rage, the anger that this young woman had, so long ago, been denied any chance to be her own person, to be anything other than a walking cocoon of old pain. And grief, I felt grief, because whatever I had loved about her, surely this too was being destroyed, undone in a whirlwind of my own making.

And then those feelings, too, flared out, as I stared in surprise at what was before me. Lying on the floor amid the insect-wing scraps was a tiny girl, maybe nine or ten years old, curled in a ball and sleeping deeply.

I did not try to wake her up. Not knowing what else to do, I wrapped her in the lace bed cover and carried her to the truck. Halfway home she rubbed her eyes and looked around. "Where are we?" her high-pitched voice squeaked. "I'm taking you home, honey," I said. And she answered "Okay," before turning over on the wide seat and going back to sleep. When we got back to the house, I tucked her into bed in the powder blue room. Raven and Bella sniffed her excitedly as they picked their settling places.

I sat on the windowsill watching her sleep for a few minutes until my stomach, no longer unsettled by horrors of the past, reminded me that I had not eaten all day. I went down to the kitchen for a tart apple and a cup of cold milk. After a while I decided no more surprises were forthcoming that day, and that any new revelations about how I felt or what I knew would have to wait for the dawn. Tomorrow there would be decisions to make. Tonight there would be sleep, peaceful sleep, barely rippled by half a dream. O

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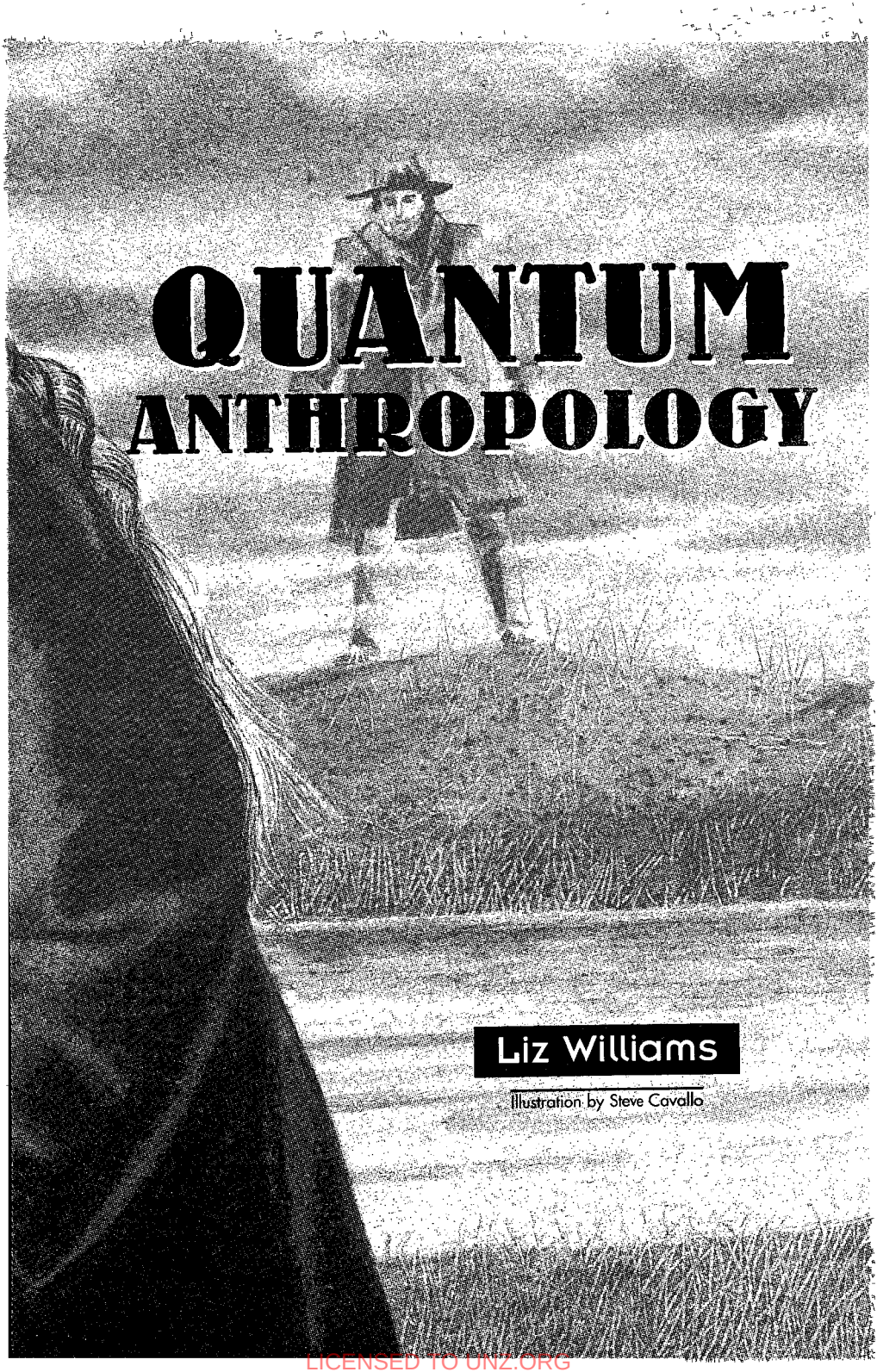

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Liz Williams, the daughter of a conjuror and a Gothic novelist, currently lives in Brighton, England. She has a Ph.D. in philosophy of science from Cambridge, and her anti-career ranges from reading tarot cards on Brighton pier to teaching in Central Asia. Her novel *The Ghost Sister* (also featuring the world in which "Quantum Anthropology" is set) was published by Bantam last July, and a second novel, *Empire of Bones*, is due in April. The author's short fiction publications include stories in *Asimov's*, *Interzone*, *Realms of Fantasy*, *The Third Alternative*, and *Visionary Tongue*. She is co-editor of the recent anthology *Fabulous Brighton*.

One: Genreth

I first saw the ghost on the shores of Eil Ei Heirath, at the end of a winter's day before dark. I had been hunting, and the bird's blood was still hot in my mouth, but it was only the fourth kill that day. The bodies of the *oroth* lay soft and heavy in the bag that hung from my shoulder. Turning for home, I scattered a handful of their pale feathers along the hunting path as a sign of respect. And so I was startled when the ghost rose up before me like a shadow out of the snow; I had not earned a haunting from the spirits of birds.

I soon saw, however, that this ghost had a foolish appearance: half human, as if unfinished. It gaped at me as if it had never seen a girl before, and flapped its hands, making meaningless sounds. It wore a low hat and a thick coat. Its skin was pale, but not like my own: I am a northerner, typically so, with skin as wan as ash. The ghost was pink and unwholesome; the color of meat that has started to rot. Its eyes were black and liquid. I sent out my senses, but as I had expected, I could not feel it. It was not a proper part of the world, and so I ignored it: I had heard that such creatures used to haunt the northern lakeshores. But I had better things to do than be troubled by spirits or folk whom the world had spurned, so I brushed past it on the path and did not look back.

I had forgotten it by the time I reached the tower. My sister Irrys was sitting impatiently by the fire.

"You took your time," she said, sourly. It was only envy, I knew. In these last few days, Irrys had come down with the chills and visions that can sometimes mark the start of waterfever, and the *satahrach* had insisted that she stay inside. She was a dreadful patient. She whined to whoever would listen that she was perfectly well, that it was just the heat and stuffiness of the tower that compounded her sickness. She complained that she kept dreaming of her lover Ettar; that he was lost and alone in the mountains above Derenthsara, where ice lies thinly over the ravines, and people hunt humans for pleasure. The *satahrach* put a gnarled hand on her brow and told her that it was nothing more than inner heat. Meanwhile, I had gone hunting alone.

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"You're well enough to sulk, I see," I said now.

"I'm well enough to be out in the winter." She turned her head so that the long hair fell down her back like snow, shining cold in the light of the fire. "So, did you catch anything?"

"*Oroth*. Four of them."

"Not too bad, then," Irrys acknowledged, grudgingly.

"Oh, come on, Irrys! If you'd caught them yourself, you'd be boasting for days!"

"*Oroth* are an easy kill at this time of year," she muttered. "They grow heavy; they can't fly. What did you do, throw your coat over them while they waddled about?"

I did not reply to this insult, but smiled a superior smile to annoy her and left my sister sulking by the fire. And between worry for her, and the task of plucking the birds, I did not think of the ghost again.

Two: Daniel Ottrey

They say that over a hundred years ago, several expeditions set out for this little uncharted world, but no one knows what became of them, or even whether they reached Monde D'Isle at all. That was in the days of the Core expansions, when many small craft were launched onto the galactic tides, seeking legends. Now, such expeditions are less common, and more thorough. We have the proper equipment, and a greater degree of bureaucracy. The task of hunting down lost colonies always has that tang of romance, but the visa sections of government offices are not known for their poetry, or their souls.

We were only permitted to stay on Monde D'Isle for a month; sanctioned to make contact with any descendants of the original colonists and undertake preliminary research, but after that, we were obliged to return to the Demesne worlds and submit proposals for further study and a grant application. The current expedition would be difficult enough. I was the only anthropologist aboard. The rest of the crew were interested mainly in soil samples and geological strata, and were scornful of any life form greater than mold. I considered them typically narrow-minded academics. Moreover, this was my first research assignment after the completion of my anthropological training, and I felt that the crew did not take me seriously. It wasn't only that their discipline differed so greatly from my own, but that there could be little common understanding between us. After all, they were dealing with the dull material, empirical world; I, with the fundamental precepts of social interaction.

"So what exactly are the premises on which your discipline is based?" Val Rettino had asked, skeptically. "That the principles of quantum physics can be applied to sociology? That you change things—social situations—just by *looking* at them, not even by participating in them? Like—what was that ancient experiment?—peering into a box and seeing whether there's a dead cat there or not? I've heard that your discipline isn't considered mainstream, either—isn't it often described as a kind of faith, based on an inadequate comprehension of old ideas about quantum principles?"

By then, I was used to such challenges, and had learned to mask my annoyance behind a semblance of objectivity. Rettino was clearly trying to

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goad me. "You're correct in your initial description," I told him, loftily. "We do indeed hold that the very act of observation alters a social context—certainly in the case of trained observers such as myself. This is why one must be extremely careful in undertaking the sort of research that I do." I did not add that it was why I tended not to socialize overmuch with the crew; I feared that it might offend them.

So when the navigational systems of the ship went down, leaving myself and the little lander temporarily stranded on the planet below, I was inclined to regard my predicament as being in the light of an unexpected gift rather than as a curse.

"Rettino says it'll take a week," Ellen Eng told me apologetically over the array. I could see her long prim face veiled with a haze of static, like an interstellar nun.

"But he can definitely fix it?" I was just checking, not yet worried.

"It isn't difficult, apparently, just complicated and time-consuming. He says there's no way we *won't* be able to get you offworld. All you have to do is sit tight."

Now, in one of my brief returns to consciousness, reading these words in my handpad journal, I am aware of their irony. Ellen and Rettino were right. The navigational array was easily fixed, though it took longer than expected. But I no longer think that rescue is an option.

Three: Genreth

Irrys, irritatingly, saw portents for her lover's return everywhere: in the sparks that spat from the sea-coal blaze, in the trail of a falling star, in the shadows in the snow. At last, Mithra, our *satahrach,* got fed up and told her to stop imagining things.

"If it's a proper portent, you'll know it when you see it."

"But what would a proper portent *be?*" Irrys cried, gripping the arms of the chair so hard that her nails slit the material. The *satahrach* clucked with disapproval.

"Proper portent? A sign in the air, or in blood on the lintel. A spirit, or ghosts, which attach themselves to trouble like river-leeches. And *will* you watch what you're doing with your hands! You don't see Genreth fretting and fidgeting over some worthless young man, do you? Why can't you be more like your sister? I don't understand how two from the same litter can be so different!"

"Because Genreth's got a heart like a winter stone, that's why," Irrys snapped, and ran out of the room. She was, we agreed, taking it hard.

A day later, however, a proper portent finally showed up. And to my surprise, it took the form of the ghost I had seen on the hunting path.

Four: Daniel Ottrey

I've found them! my excited journal entry reads. It might be more accurate to say that one of them found me. I had gone out into the snow to break the ice down at the spring and replenish the water supply on the lander.

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With Ellen and Rettino assuring me on the hour that the repairs were going well, that there was no need for worry, and that they'd have me up and out in the next few days, I was prepared to make the most of my adventure. I wrote up my notes, checked the service mechanism of the lander, and then headed out with the canister.

I met the woman on the path. At first, I thought that I was imagining things, as though I had conjured her out of air and shadows: the black coat, her pale face and paler hair, eyes like chips of ice. She was carrying a bag and a single feather clung to her lips. She opened her mouth as if to speak, and I saw blood on her teeth like a child's fairy story: black as a raven's wing, and white as snow. Red as blood. She looked at me as though I presented some kind of personal affront, stepped past me with disdain, and was gone down the track.

I began to call after her, but belatedly remembered my training. I needed to set the observational parameters of our meeting more carefully. She did not look back. I wanted to see where she was heading, so I followed her down the path. An hour later, I came to a spine of rock. Below, a dark stone tower stood on the shores of an icy lake. A spiral of smoke curled from its conical roof. I saw the tall figure of the girl trudging across the snow; she reached the tower, and vanished inside. I would have followed her down, but it was twilight now and snowclouds were massing over the peaks. I deemed it best to return to the lander.

The snow lasted for a day, but on the morning after that, I woke to find a clear, watery sky and pale sunlight. Today, I decided, I would go in search of the girl, and build on our initial contact. Strapping on the snowshoes, I set out down the barely discernible track, thanking fortune that Monde D'Isle was a wintry world. I was thankful for any echo of my home.

As I drew closer to the tower, I could see that it was built from some kind of glazed black brick: it looked solid, and yet not heavy. The glaze reflected the snowlight, lending a curious insubstantiality to the building. The doors were metal, and carved with all manner of fanciful beasts and birds; higher, I could see windows of what looked like waxed paper. Close to one wall was a saddle of stone, its purpose unclear to me. I perched myself upon it to set the *lingua franca* running, but I was almost immediately interrupted. The doors swung open smoothly on oiled hinges, and two women stepped forth. One of them was the girl whom I had met in the mountains. It was preferable—according to the principles in which I had been trained—that they note me first, so I did not speak. The girl closed the doors behind her, and stopped to adjust a bootlace. She glanced up at me, and paused. She frowned. She said something in a liquid rush of language to her companion. The *lingua franca* hummed, starting to analyze the speech, and I stepped forward, smiling. The two women glanced at me again, as if I were of no more consequence than the stone on which I had been sitting. Then they turned, and walked away. I was so startled that I violated my training then and there.

"Wait!" I cried, knowing perfectly well that they would not understand me, but nevertheless hoping to distract them, engage them for long enough that the *lingua franca* could begin its work on their words. They paid no attention to me. I followed them, and found myself traversing the ridge above the lakeshore. The girls glanced up at the ridge, and they could not have failed to see me, for I stood there in plain view. But then they turned back to the lake. I watched them helplessly as they threw a long net out to catch the graceful white birds that waded in the icy shallows. They killed them by

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snapping the birds' necks with their teeth; an economically cruel gesture that reminded me of a cat killing mice. When they had snared three of the birds, they made their way back up to the tower, walking straight past me and chattering, like the young girls who frequent the boulevards of La Vard's Demesne.

Once more I followed them, as far as the doors of the tower. Again, the girl paused to attend to her troublesome bootlace, and I took my chance. I slipped through the doors of the tower into a dim, quiet hall. The girls stepped in behind me, but though a perfect stranger was standing before them in their own dwelling place, they moved around me, like water around a stone. So much for my careful theories of identity and observation, participation and interference. Frustrated, I was now determined to be noticed, and to discover why I might be so insignificant a thing.

Five: Genreth

"I told you so," I said, when we found the ghost sitting witlessly on the mounting block. I wouldn't have seen it if it hadn't moved. "And Mithra told you, too, that the portent would appear. Clearly, it has taken the form of a ghost. Now will you stop whining on about Ettar?"

"It doesn't mean he's alive," Irrys said, tossing her silvery braid. I could see that she was determined to milk every drop of drama from the situation. The ghost followed us down to the lake. I thought I glimpsed it standing on the ridge.

"Ignore it," I told her.

"So, Genreth," my sister said, as we snared the white *serai,* "What *are* ghosts?"

She so rarely conceded that I might know more than she did that I was pleased to display my understanding.

"Well," I told her. "The principal kind of ghost is merely the memory of a life. They have left their bodies behind; they are not part of the world as we are. They do not have the connection to it that they had in life."

Irrys was frowning, so I added, "Stand there, by that rock. Now. What is under the ground?"

Without hesitation, she replied, "Iron-stone and *paitry*, like the bricks of the tower. Deeper, I can feel water, and a seam of coldstone crystal."

"And how do you know that?"

She blinked. "I just do."

"Of course you do. That is what it means to be human, to have these abilities. But a ghost is different. Take the one that we have just seen. I cannot sense it; only see it."

"Aren't you afraid of it?"

I paused. It was true that the ghost scared me, I admitted reluctantly to myself, but I'd rather have died than said so to my sister. I replied, "Why should I be? It is only the remnant of a person, and can do us no physical harm. But it is best to ignore it, all the same. If you acknowledge them, they can steal a piece of your soul."

I glimpsed the ghost again when we came back into the tower, but the last thing I wanted to do was to bind it to me by paying it more attention. In the morning, it was gone.

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Six: Daniel Ottrey

I wandered through the chilly tower, unchallenged. I met other people on a landing: a middle-aged man and an elderly woman. Their eyes were like lamps in the light cast through the paper windows; despite their ancient origins, they looked barely human. I expected consternation, dismay, or anger, but like the girls at the lake, they paid no attention to me. Such extraordinary behavior both confused and infuriated me. I greeted them in my own language, but the old woman flicked her fingers at me in a gesture of dismissal, and continued with her conversation. Forced to play eavesdropper, I set the *lingua franca* to record, and waited until I had sufficient data for it to analyze what it had learned. I felt embarrassed to be standing there on the landing, in someone else's house, holding the humming box of the translation device. Why did they not acknowledge me? Much of my training had been based on contact and its problems, but I had not considered that I might be invisible. Uneasily, I wondered, too, what effect my observation of these people might have upon them? What social waves might I collapse, by watching them so closely?

But despite my puzzling reception, I was nonetheless excited. Once I had cracked the language, I told myself, then I could start to make the correct approaches. Perhaps there was some ritual greeting without which these people could not acknowledge me. Maybe I had unwittingly offended them in some way—easily done, with less developed cultures—and needed to proffer an explanation.

At last the subjects of my study finished their conversation and moved on. After another twenty minutes or so, the *lingua franca* sang out, indicating that it had reached the first stage of a breakthrough. It had linked the unfamiliar speech to two ancient languages. I went back down the stairs in search of the girl, and eventually found her in the kitchen, gutting a bird with swift, sharp strokes of a knife.

"Madam, I greet you," I said via the *lingua franca,* adding sincerely, "And may I give apology, for any offense I may unwittingly have caused."

The girl glanced up, frowning. She stared through me as though I were no more than air, and turned back to her task.

"I realize that I don't understand your society—I am a newcomer here. Forgive me if I don't know the correct way in which to address you. Perhaps you would be kind enough to explain matters to me?"

This time, she did not even bother to look up. I confess that this enraged me. I stepped forward, and put my hand on her arm. I was expecting outrage, perhaps fear, though looking back, it was a stupid thing to have done—after all, she was holding a knife. But she shook my hand away like a cat twitching its ear when a fly troubles it, and slit the bird's flesh with a single, decisive gesture.

All the principles in which I had been so diligently trained vanished entirely at that moment. I begged her to talk to me. I made, I see now, a thorough fool of myself. But at last the incongruity of the situation struck me: here was I, a recently graduated anthropologist, standing raving in an alien kitchen, pleading to be noticed by a beautiful young woman who showed none of the usual responses that one would expect in such a situation. When she had finished gutting the birds, she picked up the corpses and carried them over to a wooden box lined with ice. Her mouth was set tight; perhaps with irritation. Turning her back on me, she went out of the room.

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Seven: Genreth

It was not until the ghost re-appeared—babbling like a week-old infant—that I finally realized what had happened. The *satahrach* had said that the ghost was a portent, for Ettar. But for the spirit to be so persistent, Ettar must be in grave danger, or even dead. For all my scornful words, I felt very guilty as I walked from the kitchen and went in search of Irrys. She was a silly girl, but she was still my sister, and I knew that she cared about her young man. If I had misjudged the situation, and he really was in trouble . . . well, there was not a lot I could do about it now. I was not trained in these matters, but the *satahrach* was.

I found Mithra in her herb room, standing over a brazier. I told her about the ghost. She was not happy.

"It may be that you're right. But I want you to stay away from that ghost, Genreth. It seems to be haunting *you,* and that means that it desires your soul. You must not talk to it, or even look at it."

"But surely we should question it—find out what it knows about Ettar?"

"I will see to that. I will summon it, here and now. Go outside, and wait."

I would have liked to have watched, but it was disrespectful to argue with elders, and anyway, I knew from past experience that she'd only refuse. So, reluctantly, I waited outside the herb room, watching smoke seep through the cracks in the door. After an hour or so, the door opened.

"The ghost will not come," Mithra said. "I've tried everything I know." She did not look pleased.

"Maybe it will come for me."

"You are untrained." She added, more gently, "I do not say, Genreth, that you are not capable of that training—indeed, it may be that this is a sign that you are to be my replacement in this regard, which would please me. But the *satahrachin* training is long."

"Then what am I to do about the ghost?"

"I told you. Pay no attention to it."

"We can't just let Ettar die."

"We don't know for certain that this is what the portent means. Are you prepared to go after Ettar? Try to lay the ghost to rest?"

She looked at me, and I knew what I had to do. I wasted no time. I ran to my room, and took my sword from its place on the wall. I buckled the sheath onto my back, slipped my black-handled knife into my boot, took my good winter cloak, and went downstairs. I met Irrys in the hallway. Her face was pale in the dim light, but determined.

"We'll find him, Irrys," I said. "Don't worry. I won't rest until we do."

No sooner was the vow out of my mouth than the front door opened. There in the doorway, silhouetted against the light and with a foolish smile on his face, stood Ettar himself.

We both gaped at him like a pair of stunned *oroth*. He smiled back, confident of his welcome. It was a moment before I could utter a single word.

"Well?" he asked, the smile fading a little. "Aren't you pleased to see me, then?"

Irrys flung herself into his arms. I waited until they had finished hugging and kissing, and then I said, faintly, "Ettar. . . . Are you all right?"

He looked surprised. "I'm very well. Why?"

"We thought you might be lost, or in trouble," I told him, through gritted teeth.

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"Not in the slightest. I had a fine trip. But I'm touched to see you were so concerned about me," he said over my sister's shoulder. The foolish smile widened. "I didn't think you liked me, Genreth."

"I'm glad you're safe," I said, before I forgot myself and hit him, and then I stumped back upstairs, took off my coat, and hung my sword on the wall. I turned back to the door, and saw Mithra standing there.

"Ettar—" I began.

"—is back. Now we know, Genreth. The ghost is a deceiver. And surely after your soul."

Eight: Daniel Ottrey

I tried to talk to others of the household, even tugging at the occasional sleeve, but without result. People brushed me off, stepped past me, murmured things that were incomprehensible to the *lingua franca*. It was a fascinating situation, but I was dismayed to find that it also distressed me. I felt slighted, as though I were nothing. At least the crew of the ship had *noticed* me. I began to look back on my arguments with Rettino with a certain nostalgia.

Baffled, I decided to return to the lander. I had my handpad with me in the tower, but at least on the lander I would be able to write up my findings in relative safety. The inhabitants of the tower were beginning to inspire me with an obscure kind of fear. But when I went to the main door and tried to open it, I found that it had been locked, presumably for the night. I wrenched and rattled at it, but the locks were sturdy and did not give. I was trapped. Annoyed and alarmed, I made my way back up to the attics, which seemed deserted, and took out the portable communicator. At least I would be able to speak to the crew. By this time, I was beginning to feel a desperate need to talk to someone—indeed, *anyone*. But then I found that I could not reach the ship: transmission was blocked.

I demanded an explanation from the communicator, but it replied smoothly, "Local conditions are not conducive to transmission. It is suggested that composition of surrounding material is to blame."

There must have been something in the stone of the tower that prevented the signal getting through. I even tried leaning out of the window, but that didn't work either, and it was a long way down. The cold air made my eyes water. I looked down at my hand, holding the communicator, and for a moment it appeared curiously blurred and insubstantial. I blinked to clear my vision, and sat disconsolately down on a nearby couch, to wait for morning.

Nine: Genreth

It would be necessary, so Mithra said, to exorcise the ghost, which had been seen around the house all through the previous afternoon. It had not troubled me again, but Mithra thought that it might simply be biding its time, having failed to lure me out into the world. The thought made me cold, and nervous. I was not familiar with exorcism, so Mithra explained. In order to expel the ghost from the house, we must all gather together in the main hall, and, with the assistance of particular chants and herbs, we must will it

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out of existence. This task must be started at dawn, when the veils that lie between this world and the next become thin. My family grumbled about having to rise at such an hour, but recognized the need for it. Irrys was disgustingly superior, and said that no doubt it was some fault in my character that had drawn the ghost to me. I was haughty, she said, and too proud. I did not bother to answer this ridiculous assertion, but it was true that I felt both humiliated and alarmed by the ghost's presence. I slept badly that night, and longed for dawn.

At last, I rose and opened the window, to see a faint light over the mountains. At that moment, Mithra knocked on the door to summon me downstairs. We congregated in the main hall, in silence. Mithra lit a brazier, threw acrid herbs upon it, and motioned us to sit around it with our hands joined. This was all we had to do: exorcisms require concentration, so Mithra said, rather than skill. But that concentration must be complete. At all costs, we were not to think about the ghost, for such things thrived on human attention like moths drawn to a lamp. We must render our minds blank, so that it could gain no purchase, and remain like this until Mithra had assured herself that the ghost was gone, willed away. I sat gripping Irrys and Ettar's hands, and tried to think about everything but spirits.

Ten: Daniel Ottrey

I must have fallen asleep on the couch, for when I woke, it was already light. I felt stiff and cold. I raised my hands to my face to blow upon them, and gaped in horror. The worn pattern of the rug showed clearly through my palms. My hands had become translucent. As I stared, the flesh returned; it must, I thought, be the result of fatigue. I had to get out of this unfriendly place, and seek refuge in the lander. I went swiftly to the door, but as I reached for the handle, I saw that my hands were once again transparent. I could see through my sleeve. Somehow, I was becoming invisible in truth. It must be some trick of the light, I thought frantically, some optical illusion. All I had to do was reach the door, and—

Eleven: Genreth

Through the trance-like state into which I had fallen, stunned by the herbs in the coals, I saw that Mithra had come back into the room. She was smiling. I raised my head to ask her about the—but no, I must not think of that. Anything but that. I concentrated on Irrys's warm fingers, clasped in my own, and soon nothing mattered but the drugged silence in my head.

Twelve: Daniel Ottrey

—and I was back in the room. My hands were visible again. The red sunset sent a finger of light across the patterned rug. I took a deep, shaking breath, and then knew nothing more.

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I have been in this room for three days now, fading in and out of the world. In the brief periods of my return, I have inscribed as much as I can into the handpad, in the unlikely event that someone will ever find it. Most of my notes are speculations, incoherent and frantic, based on the nature of my discipline. All my training in quantum anthropology concerned the effects of observation on the subjects of study, but what of the watcher himself? What effect does observation, or its lack, have upon *him?* Sometimes it seems to me that I am merely mad. But sometimes I think that the people of the tower are opening and closing the box of reality, and I am flickering across its borders as their attention waxes and wanes, or that my unswerving belief in the precepts of my discipline is causing me to collapse my own wave function, down to smooth zero.

But what is increasingly certain, now, is that even if the crew come for me, there will no longer be any one here to rescue. A mirror hangs on the wall of the attic, catching the changing light. Each time I return, I rush across, and look. Sometimes there is a face in the mirror: a frightened shadow, a ghost. And soon there will be nothing at all. ❍

LAGRANGE POINT

The law of inverse-square:
old friends

in distant cities
will forget your dog's name

a father's death
will pass unnoticed.

Between our two bodies
solace accretes, tangible

made from forgetfulness
and rotating time

this fraction of me over you
unsolved, this is gravity.

—Alex Irvine

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Custer's Last Jump and Other Collaborations—a collection of works by authors such as Steven Utley and Bruce Sterling that were written in collaboration with Howard Waldrop—will be out later this year from Golden Gryphon Press. Mr. Utley's own collection, *Silurian Tales* (of which his latest story is part), inches toward completion. In that complicated world of his creation, we can explore the difficulties involved in . . .

TREADING THE MAZE

Steven Utley

"Gutsinger," he says breathlessly. "You're an awfully hard man to get to see."

Obviously not hard enough, but you don't say so. You don't say anything. The initial shock and surprise have somewhat abated, the impulse to fruitless recrimination has been suppressed, though when this is over you intend to find out why you've been paying good money for a security system if any lunatic off the street can invade your home, your very sanctum sanctorum. Your anger is evanescent, but not your fear. You have begun to consider the situation in which you find yourself with, well, not clinical detachment, but at least a certain clear-mindedness, enough so that the question of how he got in, what his antecedents may be, even who he is, are all a good deal less important to you right now than, What does he intend to do next? You can't imagine the answer, or, rather, you *can,* but you don't especially like to. All the clear-mindedness in the world doesn't change the fact that this disheveled intruder is armed with a pistol, which he keeps pointed in your direction.

Moreover, though he has your undivided attention, he seems uncertain about how to proceed with whatever he does have in mind. Robbery? Not likely, given his patent lack of interest in his surroundings, and, anyway, what among the furnishings and contents of your study would be worth anything to anybody but you? He knows who you are, so it's something either personal or professional, but you're positive you've never seen this individual before, there are to the best of your knowledge no exploited or otherwise injured parties cluttering up your past, no cuckolded husbands, no colleagues whom you stabbed in the back. And, actually, he seems a little embarrassed to find himself here, invading your space, violating your privacy and your person. He looks not at you but at a point in the air one or

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two inches to the left of your head. When you move your head to put your face in his line of sight, he blinks, drops his gaze to the carpet for a moment before fixing it on a point in the air to the right of your head. You imagine that, were you to grab him by the ears, and put your face in his, he might simply roll his eyes back in their sockets until you gave up and let him go. Not that you are about to grab him by the ears or any other body part. He might instead simply shoot you. The pistol makes the distance separating you from him—two meters, perhaps—stretch to infinity. Anyway, you are not, and never have been, a man of action. Physics, in your opinion, isn't a hands-on science, and physical courage and strength aren't its prerequisites.

At last, the intruder says, "You don't look quite like your pictures," and you wonder frantically why that should be significant enough to rate mention. Perhaps he doesn't know you after all, perhaps he is indeed some lunatic off the street who has just happened to fasten on you. "I remember," he says, "the first time I ever saw you, years ago, when you first announced your big discovery. You talked about the possibilities it opened up. Scientific teams would go through your wormhole, to the world of hundreds of millions of years ago. Before there were even dinosaurs. Before there was much of anything except ooze and bugs and slime. And everyone bought it. *I* bought it."

Your tongue bestirs itself with effort in the arid cave of your mouth. Your lips seem fused together, unwilling to part. You say, hoarsely, very carefully, "I never claimed it was the world of four hundred million years ago. I went out of my way, again and again, to explain that it was a world *like* our world hundreds of millions of years ago."

The man nods. "Oh, I see that *now*. You weren't selling us time travel at all, but travel to another universe. *Then,* well, I was like everybody else, we all heard what we wanted to hear."

"I—I wasn't selling anything at all. I just stated the facts. Time travel is impossible. The existence of infinite multiple universes is assumed in quantum physics. As you admit, no one could be bothered to listen."

"Well, isn't that some *fine* comment on human imagination? We jumped at time travel, but we couldn't be bothered with a whole other universe! And yet it's—I read your book, you know. Man, did I ever read your book! 'Events Leading to the Infinite Regress.' You said that in a limitless series of universes that aren't exactly alike, the perceptible differences, the ones that aren't all at the subatomic level—the perceptible differences are going to range from, well, just barely perceptible to truly, thoroughly strange. Mirror universes, anti-matter universes, universes where cause doesn't precede effect. Where time runs backward or in some other direction altogether. You made plain old time travel sound not just impossible but pretty damn tame, really."

"What," you ask, gesturing at the pistol, "has *that* to do with infinite multiple universes?"

He appears not to hear the question. "But it's those universes that *aren't* very different from this one that really began to disturb me—*after* I'd already gone through. Oh, not at first. At first, I was just like everybody else. And being there was mostly like field work anywhere. I lived in a tent, ate bad food, and worked like a mule from sunrise to sunset. And, of course, I took a million pictures. Now I find them very disappointing. It doesn't look so much prehistoric back there as just *empty*. It's really about as exciting to

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look at as intravenous feeding. But, oh, to *be* there—I loved every second of it, right up until the moment—I was out in the middle of goddamn nowhere, you see. Every so often, a supply barge would come through, drop off supplies, take out crates of specimens. And one day I got a letter. From my wife."

He reaches into the pocket of his coat and pulls out several badly wrinkled sheets of paper covered with fine script.

"Handwritten," he says, "on actual paper. An old-fashioned girl, my wife. But when you think about it, this—" the pages flutter as he waves them at you "—is vastly better than a chip. Much more personal. *She* touched the pages, shaped the words with her own hand. And what words! Listen to this," and he begins to read.

"'Greetings from the beach! I needed a trip. I immersed myself in work and exercised more furiously than ever after you were gone. But work refused to expand to fill the amount of time I could allot to it, and we're both going to have to accept the fact that my stomach is as flat as it's ever going to be again. Anyway, I caught myself thinking and doing some very strange things. Such as, I couldn't remember the scent and taste of you. I put my head inside your closet and inhaled deeply. For a moment, I thought I smelled you on your clothes. Then I realized what a picture I must present, standing there with my head in a closet. I'd be ruined in my profession if my colleagues knew, probably committed if my relatives knew. And all I smelled was cotton shirts and shoe leather. Not that those are bad smells, they just weren't the entirety of your scent. This whole episode would've been funny if it hadn't been pathetic. At least I didn't go to your underwear drawer. Anyway, here I am. I've brought work along, of course, and between that and exploring—which is just exercise with scenery—I ought to be able to stay busy while I'm here.'"

He looks up from the page and grins and asks, "Has anyone ever been that crazy in love with you?"

You say nothing. You have decided that you are indeed at the mercy of an insane person.

"Further down the page," he says, "she wrote, 'I do miss you terribly. It isn't as though you've gone to Antarctica or the moon or Mars. I can find Antarctica on a map. I can see the moon and Mars in the sky. Those are *places*. But the world of four hundred million years ago is buried so deep in the earth and so deep in time that it has no meaning. I try to make it exist for myself. I need to feel that you still inhabit a plane of being, that you are *somewhere*. I came here to the seashore, I think, to try to synthesize a sense of its reality with what's at hand, the texture of beach sand, the gleam of shells, the smell of salt water, the sound of the surf, the way the sky looks when sunlight suffuses a thinning overcast. I need this sensory input to try to flesh out the ancient world in your photos so that I can mentally experience it—imagine smelling, hearing, touching it, as well as seeing it. I'm able to hold parts of it in my mind for a little while at a time. For example, I can see the broken limestone cliffs gleaming like naked vertebrae above your camp. But I can't make it all exist all at one time.'"

He stuffs the pages back into his pocket. "Well. Now the strangest day of my life gets into high gear. I'm still reading the letter when I hear a helicopter coming my way. When it circles overhead and begins to descend, I'm thinking, What the hell, this is wrong, I don't rate a helicopter. But it lands, and someone from the base camp hops out and tells me, 'I have some bad

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news.' It seems that, four hundred million years away, back here, now, in the twenty-first century—my wife is dead."

You scrape your dry tongue over your dry lips, wonder what to say, how best to respond. "I'm sorry. You have my deepest sympathy."

He shrugs and says, with a sardonic smile, "I guess I should feel guilty because she wasn't on my mind oftener. I guess she was pretty special. But I didn't come here for your sympathy. Let me tell you the rest of my story. They practically drag me aboard the helicopter, they take me back to the base camp, back to the ship and the jump station, and the whole time I'm trying to tell them there's been a mistake. I guess they thought I was crazy with grief. I wondered if I was crazy, too. Well, nobody's qualified to decide if he's crazy. So I started wondering instead about what you've been saying all along, that all those other universes exist, that, given infinity, all possibilities are probabilities, all probabilities are certainties. Just as we went into that prehistoric world from this one, mucked around, collected our specimens—over in the universes that aren't very different from ours, other clever physicists all named Cutsinger—or not—discovered their *own* wormholes, and other people like me went through. All thinking we're from the same place, of course. All thinking we're *in* the same place, too. All thinking we'll just naturally *return* to the same place we came from. Remember the old saying, wherever you go, there you are? Well, maybe people from this universe ended up someplace else. Maybe people from someplace else ended up in *this* universe!" The man laughs harshly; when the laughter fades, a rictus remains on his face. "I mean, what guarantee do we have that we get *back* to the universe we *start* from?"

An expectant look forms around the rictus; whatever game he has now decided to play, he wants you to participate. "The synchronous link," you begin, but immediately he shakes his head and jabs the air with the pistol.

"Ah. We come to the crux of the matter. You asked what this—" he turns the pistol slightly, so that you can see a gleam of light along the barrel "—has to do with infinite multiple universes. It's simple. In each of two very similar universes, I finish telling you my story, and then I ask you a question, and you answer. In *one* of those universes, I don't like your answer, I think you're lying, so I shoot you. In the other, I think you're telling the truth, and I go and take my craziness with me and leave you in peace. Never bother you again. Word of honor. Anyway, what would you gain from turning me in to the police? I mean, besides peace of mind?"

He has essayed a real smile. It serves chiefly to make him look even more haggard. Now he steps backward; when his legs meet the edge of a chair, he sits down heavily. It is as though nervous tension alone has kept him on his feet this long; with its release, he can only sag in his badly wrinkled clothes.

"If I may please have something to drink," he says, and gestures carelessly with the pistol at a small sideboard.

"I'm not much of a drinker," you say, though the truth is that you suddenly find yourself wanting a drink probably as much as or even more than he does. "There isn't much of a selection."

"Just let me have whatever you've got. Brandy, whiskey, anything. I don't care."

You reach for a decanter, but before your hand touches it, he stops you with another, more careful wave of the pistol.

"In the picture on your book," he says, "you're writing with your other hand. In all the pictures I've seen of you, you use your other hand."

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A long, pregnant pause ensues. The distance between your outstretched hand and the decanter begins to stretch toward infinity.

"If I shot you in this side of your chest," he says, "would the bullet hit your heart? Or would it miss because your heart's on the wrong side?"

You make your hand cross the distance to the decanter and close around its neck. "Which side is the wrong side? Look at the titles of those books on the shelf there. Can you read them? If so, doesn't that strongly suggest to you that you're not in a mirror universe? You haven't been annihilated by contact with that chair, nor, for that matter, with the very air around you. Doesn't *that* suggest that you're not in the anti-matter universe? Pull down that volume of history, read for yourself how Germany did not win the world wars, how Benjamin Franklin did not invent the internal combustion engine in seventeen seventy-nine. As to anything subtler—" You present your back to him so that you can pour without letting him see how your hand shakes. You turn holding two glasses and offer one to him. "What difference does anything subtler really make? This is where we are and where we're going to be from now on. Regardless."

After another long, horrible moment, he lets the pistol droop toward the floor and accepts the glass. "Yes," he says as he raises it to his lips, "regardless." He drinks, smiles, nods. "Still. About the famous synchronous link. You showed off a machine and a lot of math to prove to everybody there's a synchronous link. But maybe it was all just painted cardboard and blinking lights and scribbles. It could all have been mumbo jumbo. Now here's the big question. *Was* it?"

Seated, with a drink in his hand and the pistol not aimed at you, he seems less threatening, enough so that you manage to feel defiant. "Are you," you ask, "a physicist?"

He hesitates. "No."

"Then it was all mumbo jumbo. Unless you can follow the math—" You can see a hardening glint in his eye. He doesn't want to hear about math. Time to change tack. "You seem to overlook the fact that *I,* too, went through the anomaly. I don't even like to go outdoors, yet I went there. Unlike so many of you, I had no particular interest in that other world, no particular desire or reason to go there, except that I felt a consuming curiosity to experience a plunge into a spacetime anomaly."

"So you could write about it in your book."

"Whatever my reasons for doing it—" you find yourself saying this proudly; even a notorious homebody, and you are that and more, a recluse, an agoraphobe, can have done a physically adventurous thing in his time "—if I'd had any doubts whatever about the link—"

The intruder shakes his head in disbelief. "Never? No doubts at all, ever? Never the least shred of doubt, in the darkest hour of the night, that the great Cutsinger, Nobel winner and idol of geeks everywhere, might be, could possibly be, dare I say it, *wrong?*"

"No. None." You see him tighten his grip on the pistol. Pride, like anger, is evanescent. "Once," you admit. "One time. Just briefly."

That clearly pleases him. He relaxes again. "And?" He has the most searching expression you have ever seen on a human face. "I want to know all about it. I want you to tell me everything."

"There is not much to tell. I had a bad dream. It was just a dream, but it disturbed me so much, I moaned so loudly, that I woke myself up. I was in my cabin on the ship, I could see a rim of light around the partly closed port-

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hole cover. The clock and the sun go their own ways back there, the one lags behind the other, but both agreed then that it was time for me to get up. But all I could do was lie there gasping for breath. My body was rigid, my hands were clutching the frame of my bunk. I seemed to relax one muscle at a time. My fingers were stiff. They ached by the time I'd loosened my grip on the frame."

"Tell me about the *dream*."

"I—I dreamed I was lost in a maze. I couldn't go back the way I had come. I couldn't even look behind me, because the thing about this maze was that it closed up behind me as I walked through it. I could only see directly ahead of me, not even to the sides, and I could only go forward. I kept coming to places that were like the place I'd started from, but I was never sure, so I kept moving. Hoping I'd come to the place that looked right. The place that *felt* right."

He nods along in time with the rhythms of your speech. Then: "How did it end? Did you finally get out?"

"I woke up."

"And that was it? Just that one little hairline crack in your confidence in a theory?"

"Why would there have been anything more? It was only a dream. I was safe in my bed. I was able to assure myself by the evidence of my senses that the material, the natural world, indeed remained material and natural. It was the same when I returned through the anomaly." You spread your arms, taking in the room and more than the room. "Here is reality. If you'd read my book more carefully, you'd understand that the infinite replication of universes has nothing to do with spacetime anomalies. The anomaly is just a path between two universes. How do I know? Here are my books, my home, and here am *I*, exactly where we're supposed to be!"

"And here *I* am. Let me finish my drink, and then I'll finish my story." He gulps down the liquor, holds the glass loosely in one hand, the gun not so loosely in the other. "Back *there,* I get a love letter from my wife, and then I get the news that she's dead. And then I get back here and my wife's not only *not* dead, she's *divorcing* my ass." He raises the pistol and sights carefully along the barrel at your midsection. "And you know what the hell of it is, Cutsinger?"

He waits for a response; you can barely get the word out. "No."

"The hell of it is, I've never even been married." ❍

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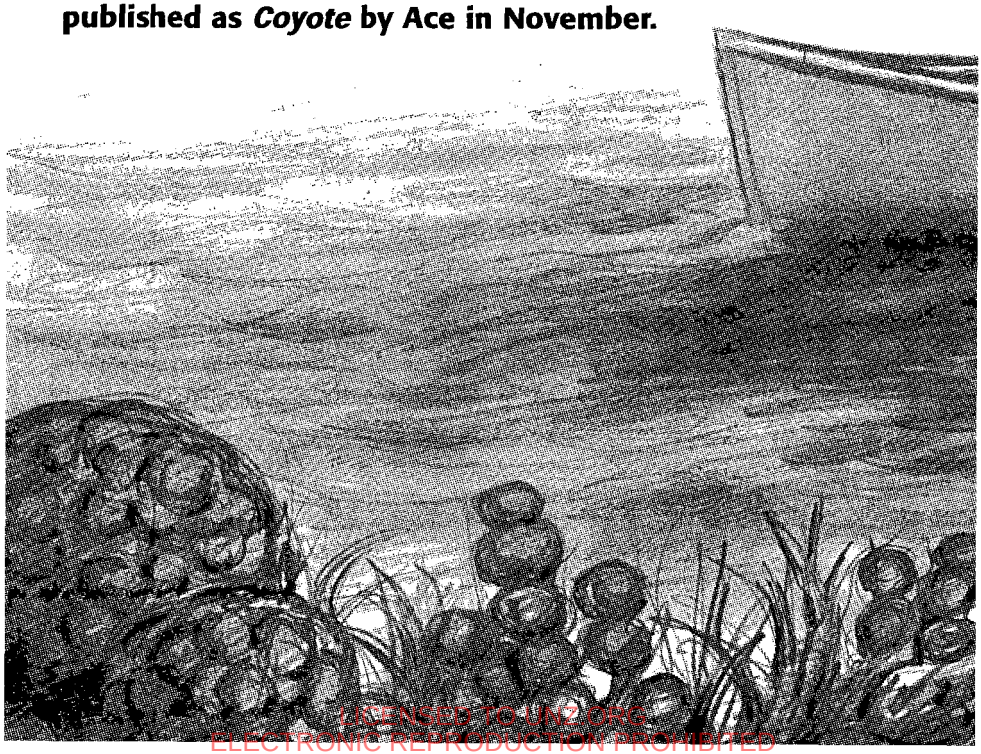
ACROSS THE EASTERN DIVIDE

Allen M. Steele

Illustration by John Stevens

This is the latest installment in the "Coyote" series—which began with "Stealing Alabama" (*Asimov's*, January 2001) and "The Days Between" (*Asimov's*, March 2001). It follows the events of "The Boid Hunt," a story that was originally published in the anthology *Star Colonies* (DAW Books, edited by John Helfers and Martin H. Greenberg). The final novel-length version of the series will be published as *Coyote* by Ace in November.



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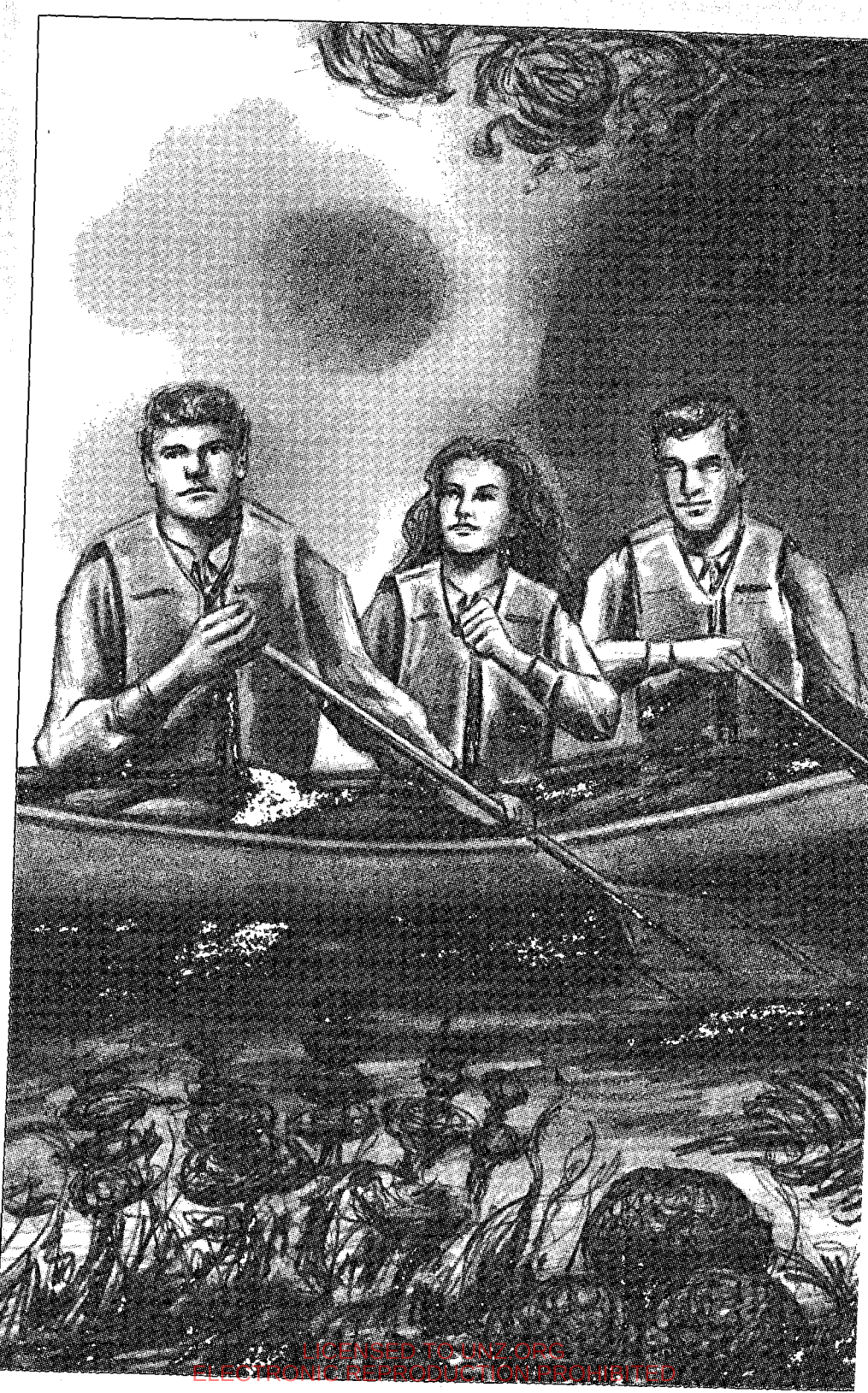

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Once upon a time, when I was young and stupid, my friends and I ran away from home. For reasons that seemed right at the time, but in fact were utterly selfish, we stole a couple of canoes, and, with little idea of where we going or what we were getting ourselves into, set out to explore the world. It was the great adventure of my life, but it came at the cost of someone else's, and for this I've never forgiven myself.

Nor has anyone forgotten what we did. It's become as much a part of the colony's history as the *Alabama*'s escape from Earth or Leslie Gillis's lonesome ordeal or even First Landing itself. I'm much older now—the other day I discovered my first gray hair, which I yanked before my mate noticed—and still I find myself telling the story. Once a year or so, a teacher will ask me to come speak to her class. Captain Lee passed away long ago, and although quite a few other members of the original expedition are still alive, the kids always want to hear about the trip I made when I wasn't much older than they are now. Sometimes I've had to correct things they've heard, yet I've never told the entire story, not only because I clean things up a bit for adolescent ears, but also because the truth hurts too much.

As a result, fiction has caulked the gaps left open by the absence of fact. Some of these untruths are rather amusing—for example, that the cat-whale swallowed me whole, only to spit me out again because I was indigestible—and I might have been content to let these fabrications pass, if only because tall-tales are sometimes more interesting than reality. But the last time I told the story, a girl not much younger than I had been, raised her hand and asked—very shyly, and with some embarrassment—whether it was true a baby had been born during the trip, and whether it was mine.

I told her the truth, but by the same token I also lied, and somehow I managed to get through the rest of the hour without revealing my emotions. When I was done, the students clapped their hands and their teacher thanked me for giving them my time. I nodded, picked up my shawl and cap, and excused myself, but once I was outside the school house, I slumped on the front steps and broke down in tears.

I thought I was alone, but the classroom window was unshuttered. When I happened to look up, I saw the girl who had asked the question staring out at me. Her hair was brown while mine is ash-blond, and she was four and a half by LeMarean calendar whereas I had been just a few months past five—fourteen and sixteen respectively, by Gregorian reckoning—but nonetheless, she could have been my mirror image the day I told Carlos that I was ready to run away from Liberty. And she knew I had lied; her eyes told me this just before she turned her back to me.

No one should repeat the mistakes I've made. Not that girl, nor innocent boys like Carlos, Chris, David, and Barry. I've kept my secrets for too long already; if I can't say them aloud, then perhaps the least I can do is commit them to paper.

This is our story. It began the day I learned I was pregnant.

I thought I had the flu.

The symptoms were all there: high temperature, weakness in my joints and muscles, loss of appetite, vomiting after every meal. Wanting to pee all the time. No sinus congestion or coughing up phlegm, but that didn't mean anything; although everyone had been inoculated against terrestrial diseases before coming aboard the *Alabama,* the fact that we spent most of our time outdoors guaranteed that we'd get sick sooner or later. The odd part

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was that I was the first person in the colony to have come down with the flu; the bug didn't naturally exist on Coyote, and since the *Alabama* had been decontaminated before it left Earth, there was little chance that we could have brought it with us.

Kuniko put me on antibiotics and sent me to bed, then asked the Gearys to relieve me from farm chores for a few days. One of the benefits of having a doctor as an adoptive mother is that you're always going to be her first priority. Unfortunately, it also works the other way; when it was obvious that drugs weren't helping much, Kuniko gave me a complete physical. She was afraid that I might have contracted some heretofore unknown virus; several colonists had already come down with ring disease after being bitten by swampers, and, as the colony's chief physician, she lived in constant fear of an untreatable epidemic sweeping through Liberty. So she put me through a full workout, including urine analysis, and then she disappeared into the infirmary she had set up in back of the four-room log cabin we shared.

Although I had already thrown up breakfast, I was beginning to want lunch—and for the damnedest reason, I had a craving for creek crab stew, which no one in their right mind would eat unless they were on the verge of starvation—when Kuniko came to my room. I knew something was wrong when she shut the door and checked the windows before she sat down on the end of my bed. The good news was that I wasn't ill. The bad news was my condition would persist for the next eight to nine Earth months.

"Oh," I said. That was the only thing I could say. It was as if my mind was a pad and someone had just erased its screen: total blank. "Umm . . . are you sure?"

Dumb question. "Oh, well . . . sure, I could be mistaken. By the way, did I ever tell you that I cheated my way through med school?" No trace of amusement in her eyes; she wasn't playing games with me today. "Damn it, Wendy. . . ."

"I'm sorry." Numb all over, I stared at the rough planks of the floor. "I didn't know . . . I mean, I didn't think it would . . . oh, Jesus. . . ."

"Unless we're talking about immaculate conception, then you better find someone else to blame." She sighed. "Who's the father?"

I didn't answer, yet my hands involuntarily clenched and knotted the T-shirt I was wearing. It was much too large for me, and I only wore it to bed. It belonged to Carlos, but I'd swiped it from the boat house when he wasn't looking. I never washed it, so it smelled like him, and sleeping in it felt like being in his arms. Although Kuniko knew it wasn't one of my own clothes, she had never asked how I'd obtained it. She probably knew anyway, and now she was doubtless kicking herself for giving me so much freedom.

She waited a moment, then nodded. "Okay, fine. I think I can guess. For God's sake, you could have been more careful. I mean, if you had just come to me, I could have prescribed a morning-after. Or at least slipped you a condom for him to . . ."

"It wasn't like that. I mean, it happened so suddenly. . . ."

Her face darkened. "Did he rape you?"

"No!" I looked up at her. "I wanted to . . . I mean, it was my . . . what I'm trying to say is . . ."

"Shh. Relax." Kuniko took my hand, gave it a gentle squeeze. "I'm not blaming you . . . or him, either," she added, not very convincingly. "These things happen. I just wish you would have been a little smarter about it, that's all."

Now I was more ashamed than scared. Kuni was more than my foster-

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mother; she was also my best friend, or at least among the adult members of the colony. She had taken me in when no one else either could or would . . . and although Liberty suffered shortages of food and replacement parts for electronic equipment, one thing we had in surplus were orphans.

Just after the *Alabama* reached Coyote, my father died in an accident aboard ship while helping Captain Lee close it down prior to parking it in permanent orbit. Or at least that was what everyone had been told; I always thought it unlikely that Dad would allow himself to get into a position where he'd be blown out into space through an open hatch. That was the beginning of a string of fatalities. A few days later, Carlos's parents were killed by a boid while salvaging the wreckage of a cargo module that had crashed in a swamp near the colony, and last spring, Chris and David lost their father during an expedition down Sand Creek; as coincidence would have it, Carlos was among the group of men whom Gill Reese had led into the boonies to hunt boid.

Colonel Reese hadn't survived that trip either, but few people grieved his loss; a bully respected only by his fellow URS soldiers, no one made a real effort to recover his body. I was much more sorry that Chris and David no longer had a father; I spent a lot of time at their house, cooking for Sissy Levin and trying to help David recover from the shock of seeing his dad come home in a blood-stained sleeping bag.

But it was Carlos to whom I had run when the half-empty kayaks returned to Liberty that terrible night, Carlos whom I embraced with tears in my eyes. Until then, he was a just a boy upon whom I had an adolescent crush. He'd given me my first kiss, and we'd played the usual touchy-feely games behind the grange after night had fallen and we were sure the blueshirts were getting drunk at the cantina, but I couldn't honestly say I loved him. At least not then. But he'd gone down Sand Creek a teenager with a premature fuzz of a mustache on his upper lip, and come back a man who'd stood his ground when the boid which slaughtered Dr. Levin and Col. Reese turned to attack the rest of the party. When Henry Johnson related the story during the town meeting, I looked across the grange hall to see Carlos sitting on a bench with his eyes downcast, and that was the moment I realized I was in love with him.

And then I had gone and done something really stupid. . . .

"So." Kuniko had given me a few moments to myself. A tea kettle grumbled on the wood stove; she was in the main room, hand-grinding some coffee beans she had roasted last week. "When do you want it done?"

"Umm . . . what? Excuse me?"

"Wendy . . ." She kept her back to me as she sifted coffee into the filter sieves she had placed above a couple of handmade mugs. "Don't play dumb. You know what I'm talking about." A pause. "Can't do it today, because I've got a couple of appointments, but tomorrow . . ."

"What makes you think I want it done?"

She stopped, peered over her shoulder. "You're kidding," she said, and I stared back at her. "You're *not* kidding. Oh, God, I hope you're kidding. . . ."

I swallowed, shook my head. "Not kidding. I've been thinking about this. . . ."

"What? Five minutes?" The kettle began to whistle; Kuniko impatiently removed it from the stove, put it down on the counter, then turned to me. "Look, besides the fact that you're practically a child yourself . . ."

"I'm not a child!"

"Sixteen, just short of seventeen. I'm sorry, but that makes you a . . ." She

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hesitated. "A kid . . . and kids shouldn't have kids." I started to object, and she raised a finger. "Second, and more important . . . the Town Council established a one-year moratorium on new births. Remember? Not until after First Landing Day next Uriel . . . and that's two months away."

She meant two months according to the LeMarean calendar. We were near the middle of Verachiel, the first month of Coyote's summer; in another forty-five days, we'd go into Hamaliel, the second month, which would last ninety-one days, and then enter Uriel, the third month. First Landing Day was Uriel forty-seven; this would mark the first anniversary of the establishment of our colony, approximately three years by Gregorian reckoning.

Some quick mental calculation. "That's about six months, Earth-time. If I've still got nine months to go. . . ."

"Eight to nine months. A little more, maybe a little less. Still too early to put a date on it."

"Right, whatever . . . that still means I'll have the baby a month after the moratorium is over." I grinned at her. "See? Everything's legal."

"Uh-huh." Kuniko crossed her arms. "And what do I tell the Council when you start showing? That I decided to split the difference? Damn it, I'm the town doctor . . . do you know how irresponsible that makes me look?"

Although I didn't understand Kuniko's predicament back then, I do now. One hundred and four men, women, and children were aboard the *Alabama* when it left Earth. Minus our casualties, Liberty's current population stood at ninety-eight persons: barely enough to sustain a colony over the long run, but just the right size to keep everyone fed until we became self-sufficient. We'd made it through our first long winter without losing anyone to starvation, but only because we managed to raise enough fresh vegetables in the greenhouse to supplement a diet of creek crab stew. There hadn't been many fat people among us when we arrived on Coyote, but the few we had were as skinny as everyone else by the time the snow melted.

Early last spring, Captain Lee and a couple of crewmen had flown a shuttle up to *Alabama*, where they had retrieved from biostasis the embryos of some of our livestock: thirty-six chickens, twenty-four pigs, and twelve dogs. Although they were successfully incubated in noah crèches, swoops killed almost a dozen chickens before we erected a wire-mesh roof above their coop, and half of the pigs succumbed to ring disease before the dogs were trained to chase swampers away from their pen. As we'd learned from our first attempts at agriculture, introducing Earth animals to Coyote was largely a matter of trial and error.

The Council voted to delay bringing down the rest of the livestock until we learned how to adequately protect them from predators and disease. They had much the same concerns when it came to the question of raising children: True, we needed to increase our population, and the sooner the better . . . but if a swoop was capable of carrying away a full-grown rooster, what might happen if one spotted an infant momentarily left alone by his or her mother? What if a curious toddler spied a creek cat and tried to pet it? And besides that, could we yet afford to feed anyone else? Did anyone want to risk losing a child to malnutrition?

We had a long summer ahead of us: 270 days, almost an entire year by Gregorian standard. Time enough to tame the land, or at least the few hundred acres we had claimed as our own. By the end of the season, we might be able to consider letting colonists have children . . . if the summer crop had yielded sufficient harvest to get us through next winter, if we learned how to

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raise livestock without losing half of them. Until then, having a baby was a chancy proposition no responsible adult would want to accept.

But I wasn't an adult. I was a teenage girl who had gotten herself knocked up. And I'd witnessed Kuniko perform one abortion already. However much I loved and trusted her, this was one procedure I'd just as soon not go through. And, truth to be told, it wasn't as if I really wanted to have a child. I simply dreaded the prospect of having a drug-induced miscarriage. It may be easier and less painful than surgery, but it certainly didn't seem any less traumatic. . . .

But that wasn't what I told her.

"I know." I let out my breath, looked down at the floor again. "You're right. I'm sorry. It's got to be done."

"I know this is tough. Really, I do." She hesitated. "If it makes you feel any better, I've had it done myself."

I looked up at her again. "You have?" I asked, and she nodded. "How long . . ?"

"About four years ago." She shook her head. "Sorry, mixed that up. Four years subjective time . . . two years before we left Earth, I mean."

That would be sometime in 2068. Over two hundred and thirty years ago, not factoring in the time-dilation factor; it was still hard for any of us to realize that two and a quarter centuries had passed while we were in biostasis. Abortion was illegal in the United Republic of America; the Fourth Amendment of the Revised Constitution defined life as something that began at conception and guaranteed its protection under any circumstances; subsequent rulings made abortion a criminal offense punishable by life sentences for both the patient and the physician who performed it. If Kuniko once had an abortion, it must have been a terrible risk .

"I'm sorry, Kuni. I didn't . . ."

"Don't be sorry." She shook her head. "No offense taken. You didn't know." She picked up the kettle, carefully poured hot water into the sieves. The aroma of fresh coffee filled the room. "But you still don't have a choice. I wish it could be different, but . . ."

"Right." I got out of bed, pulled off my night-shirt, went over to my clothes trunk. "Umm . . . I need to take a walk. Think about this, y'know?"

She looked over her shoulder at me. "You're not going to tell. . . ?"

"No, no. I just need to think about this some." I forced a smile. "You're right. It's got to be done. Maybe . . . I dunno . . . day after tomorrow? Gimme some time?"

She nodded. "Sure. I can clear my schedule for then."

"Okay. That's good for me." I put on a catskin skirt, tied on a halter, shoved my feet into my boots. "Be back soon."

"Sure." Kuniko forgot that she had just made coffee for me. She watched as I headed for the front door. "Wendy . . . you won't. . . ?"

"No one. Promise."

Of course it was a lie. I knew that even before I slammed the door shut behind me. She probably did, too.

When we weren't in school or doing time on the farm, my friends and I hung around the boat house. A one-room shack down by Sand Creek where the canoes and kayaks were kept, it had become the place where Liberty's teenagers tended to congregate. We could swim off the docks or go flycasting for redfish, or just park our butts on the back porch and talk about how bored we were. The younger children, like Carlos's sister Marie, had their

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own swimming hole in the shallows about fifty feet away, and by unspoken agreement, the adults had ceded the boat house to the older kids so long as we didn't cause any trouble. Now and then, a blue-shirt would come by to make sure that we hadn't stolen any sourgrass ale from the cantina, but otherwise we pretty much had the place to ourselves.

It was a good place to hatch a conspiracy.

As I marched down the path leading from the back of the grange, my arrival was heralded by a high-pitched bark. The boat house was just within sight when the small black-and-tan mutt sunning himself on the porch bayed at me, giving his best shot at pretending to be a ferocious watch dog. Give Star some credit; he was very good at assassinating swampers, and even creek cats knew better than to tangle with him. But his white-tipped tail wagged too much whenever he saw a human, and a gentle scratch behind the ears was all it took to turn him into an overgrown puppy. Star accepted his due with a grin and a yawn, then escorted me onto the porch and through the door.

As I expected, Carlos was inside, working on his project. Unfortunately, he wasn't alone; Chris and Barry were helping him dope the seams of the *Orion,* while David stirred a clay pot simmering on a hook within the fireplace. The shack reeked of something sour and rancid; I gasped for breath as soon as I opened the door.

"Something die in here? Open a window or something!"

"What, you smell something?" Chris glanced at the others. "I don't smell anything."

Barry smiled and shook his head, but David's nose was pinched between his fingers and his eyes were watery. Fatty tissue from a creek cat; put in a pot and melted over a high flame, it was perfect for waterproofing; once it hardened, it was better than polymer resin, which was in short supply. Quite a few cabin windows and roofs had been sealed this way. But, man, did it stink. . . .

Bent over the upended hull of the fourteen-foot canoe, Carlos used a swamper-hair brush to spread pink slime across the hand-stitched seams of creek cat hide tightly stretched across a frame carved from faux birch. Completely focused upon his work, he barely seemed to notice my entrance. "Keep the window shut," he said quietly, not looking up from his work, "and close the door. I don't want this stuff to cool before I put it on."

The shack was hot enough already—David had his shirt off, and the other guys had their sleeves rolled up—but I kept the door open for another moment to let Star in before I shut it.

"You still sick?" Standing next to Carlos, Chris peered at me from across the canoe. "I mean, you look okay, but . . ."

"Yeah, you all right?" Carlos put down the brush, wiped his hands on his trousers. "Maybe you should stay in bed."

"I'm fine. Great." Despite the trapped warmth, I suppressed a shudder as I found a stool near the closed window. "Kuni says it's just a summer cold. She gave me some medicine."

"You're looking better." Carlos smiled. "Must have done some good . . . the medicine, I mean." He glanced over to check Chris's progress. "Hey, easy with that stuff. Don't slather it on or you'll get air bubbles."

Damn. I really needed to talk to Carlos, but not while Chris, David, and Barry were around. Yet telling him that I wanted to speak with him in private would have only raised attention; sure, Carlos would have stepped outside

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with me, but his buddies would have demanded to know what was going on as soon as he came back. The four of them were tight—particularly Chris and Carlos, who had known each other since they were little kids —and it would be only a matter of time before they got it out of him, even if I swore Carlos to secrecy. Boys are like that; it's impossible for them to keep their mouths shut.

And besides, I still didn't know what to say to Carlos, or even how to say it. Telling him I was pregnant would be hard enough; the fact that I was actually thinking about keeping the child was even worse. Carlos was just shy of turning sixteen; I might be willing to accept the role of motherhood, but there was no way he was ready to become someone's daddy. And even if he loved me as much as I loved him—and sometimes I wondered about that—I sincerely doubted marriage was in his plans.

So I sat quietly and watched them work. The *Orion* was the second boat they had built; their first, the *Pleiades,* hung upside-down from the rafters. Carlos had named them after the galleons in the Prince Rupurt stories, which was appropriate, since both canoes were designed for exploration. With cable-controlled aft rudders and sailboards mounted amidships, each canoe was capable of carrying three persons—one in the bow, one in the stern, and a passenger hunched in the middle—along with sufficient supplies for a long journey.

Building the canoes was Carlos's idea. He'd studied the wilderness-survival books his late father had brought with them from Earth, and over the course of the past winter, he had mastered his craft by helping the adults build the two-man kayaks used for fishing trips along New Florida's maze of creeks and tributaries. I think he secretly wished to emulate the adventures of Prince Rupurt; we'd all read the books Leslie Gillis had penned during the years he'd spent alone aboard the *Alabama,* but Carlos was fascinated by them, particularly the exploits of the exiled heir-to-the-throne as he sought to circumnavigate the planet Gorgon by sail. One might have thought that his participation in Gill Reese's ill-fated expedition would have quelled his ambitions, yet it only whetted his appetite. My boyfriend didn't want to settle down and raise a family; he wanted to cross the Eastern Divide and sail down the East Channel to the Great Equatorial River, and his friends had been caught up in his dreams.

The only problem was that the Town Council wouldn't let them.

Oh, they saw no problem with allowing the teenagers to build a couple of canoes. Indeed, they had voted in favor of giving them all the supplies they needed to make the *Orion* and the *Pleiades*. But Captain Lee let young Mr. Montero know that, once the colony was ready to mount an expedition past the Eastern Divide, it wouldn't be done by a handful of kids. No one wanted to risk a repeat of the Reese Expedition; the next time a group set out from Liberty to explore Coyote, it would be comprised of scientists and astronauts who had undergone FSA survival training. This was a job for men, not Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer.

Perhaps the Council was right. Perhaps they were wrong. In any case, they hadn't counted upon Becky Thatcher having her say. For even as I sat there, watching my friends put the finishing touches on a boat that they had been forbidden to use themselves, I suddenly perceived the ways and means of solving my dilemma.

"Guys," I said, "I think we need to bug out of here."

No one said anything. Carlos, Chris, and Barry continued to paint the ca-

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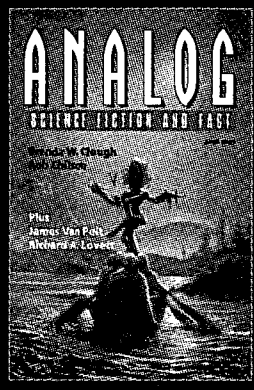

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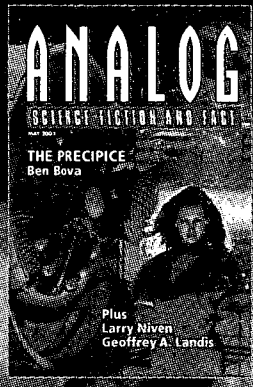

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noe's underbelly with greasy pink stuff while David stirred the pot. They were so quiet, I didn't think they'd heard what I'd just said.

I checked the window to make sure it was shut, then tried again. "I mean it. I'm serious. It's time for us to take off on our own. If we're ever going to . . . y'know, explore the Equatorial, that sort of thing . . . we're going to have to do it ourselves. Don't wait for permission. Know what I'm saying?"

Pause. Not a word from the bunch. Had they been here so long that the fumes had fried their brains? "Did you hear what I just. . . ?"

"We heard," Barry said, ever so softly. "What makes you think we want to leave?"

Barry had always been the quiet one. Taller than the others, with big hands and broad shoulders, he was the sort of kid adults mistake for being a dumb jock. More intelligent than he looked, he tended to hide his brains behind a curtain of reticent silence, but that wasn't all. His dad was a Liberty party member who had been a propulsion systems engineer aboard the *Alabama,* and Barry had to live down the fact that his father had been the one who had to be overcome when the ship was stolen from Highgate. So he was kind of stuck between two worlds: his parents, who still maintained stubborn allegiance to the United Republic of America, and his friends, who came from D.I. families whom Captain Lee had helped escape from the URA. Dad had also been a party member, so I knew where Barry was coming from, yet sometimes he was difficult to read.

"You're still building these boats, aren't you?" I nodded toward the *Orion*. "I mean, I know you guys are bored, but you wouldn't be doing this if you didn't think you actually had a chance of using them. Right?"

"Maybe we don't." David tapped his wooden spoon against the side of the simmering pot. "It's either this or feed the chickens." He glanced at the others. "Hey, that might be a hoot. Why don't we knock off here and head over to the coop?"

"Sure, go ahead," Chris murmured. "We'll catch up to you." His younger brother scowled and remained where he was.

David was the youngest of the bunch. Until recently, he had been nearly as quiet as Barry, but in the last couple of months, his personality had changed, and not for the better. His father's death hit him hard; for nearly three days, he didn't eat or sleep, and when he finally snapped out of it, it was with a newfound cynicism that wasn't very pleasant. Chris put up with David's sarcasm and ironic side-remarks, but only barely. They quarreled a lot, and once I saw Chris punch him out when David whispered something about me I didn't quite catch.

And then there was Chris . . . "You could be right." He avoided my gaze as he carefully sealed the canoe's keel. "We're not doing this for fun. Fact is, we've got plans. . . ."

Carlos gave him a hard look—*shut the hell up!*—but Chris glanced at him and shook his head. "We were going to tell you earlier," he continued, "but . . . y'know . . ."

"You don't know if you can trust me."

"No. That's not it." Carlos put down his brush, looked straight at me. "Wendy, we trust you. You're one of us. But we didn't really make up our minds until a couple of days ago, and since the Doc's been keeping you in . . ."

"You couldn't talk to me about it." It felt like a lie, but I wasn't about to call him on it. Not now, when I wasn't willing to be completely honest myself. "Sure, I understand."

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Carlos favored me one of those smiles which softened his face and caused a goofy kid to emerge from within the mannish boy I loved. Chris frowned, but then he noticed that I was watching and quickly forced himself to smile. And that, right there, was the difference between Carlos and Chris.

They were best friends long before I met either of them. They had grown up together in Huntsville, and their fathers had worked together on the Starflight Program before they were dismissed from their jobs at the Federal Space Agency for political reasons. When the Monteros and the Levins joined the conspiracy to steal the *Alabama,* they had done so largely because they wanted their children to grow up in a place where they wouldn't have to worry about Prefects breaking down the door and spiriting them away to a government re-education camp. Until the day they were revived from biostasis, any differences they had were trivial.

Now they had one point of rivalry, and it was . . . well, me.

The five of us were the only teenagers among the handful of children in Liberty, and since I was the only girl their age, it made sense that the two alpha-males of our group would fight for my attention. Yet though I had been initially attracted to Chris—smart, good-looking, a certain *savoir faire*—he always had an attitude that turned me off; he tried too hard to be someone he wasn't. With Carlos, there was no pretense; he was who he was. Chris always wanted to play the coolest guy in school; Carlos didn't seem to care what people thought of him. Chris tolerated his little brother; Carlos obviously loved his sister Marie, even when she was being a crybaby. And when we were alone, Chris had his hands all over me; with Carlos, I had to be the one to initiate our first kiss.

So I'd picked Carlos, but not before I'd given Chris a chance. We had our moment together, but it didn't work out, and that pretty much settled the issue. After I became Carlos's girl, Chris did his best to be a good loser. Yet sometimes there was a certain look in his eye that unnerved me; he'd never forgotten that he and I were once a pair.

"You're right. We're taking off." Carlos picked up a rag, wiped his hands on it. "*Orion*'s done . . . or it will be, once we get through here. Barry and David finished stitching the sails a couple of days ago, and tonight we're going to come back here and drop the boat in the water, see if she floats."

"She'll float." Barry patted the underside with his hand. "This baby's watertight. And we've already tested *Pleiades*. She's ready to go, too."

"You've already planned this?" I demanded, and Carlos responded with a solemn nod. "And you didn't tell me?"

A glance at the others. "I was going to tell you, I swear. . . ."

"Damn it, Carlos!" I was already off my stool, stalking toward him. "If you were going to leave *without* me. . . !"

He dropped the rag and backed away, raising his hands defensively. "No, no, I wasn't going to. . . !"

"Woooo-hoo! Pussy-whipped!" David chortled, stood up to make a vaguely obscene gesture. "She's got you by the third leg, man! You're pussy-whipped. . . !"

"Shut up!" Chris slung his brush across the room. Still grinning, his brother ducked for cover; the brush ricocheted off the wall and nearly hit Star. The dog recoiled, then walked over to it and began licking congealed fat off the bristles.

By now, I'd backed Carlos into a corner. He ducked to avoid banging his head against the *Pleiades*, and I took the moment to slam him against the wall. "If you were going to leave without me. . . !"

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"I wasn't! Swear to God, I wasn't!" Carlos tried to laugh it off, then realized that I was serious. He glanced past me at the others. "We were going to tell you! Weren't we. . . ?"

From the corner of my eye, I could see Chris, Barry, and David looking at one another. "Yeah, sure," Chris said reluctantly. "Like he says . . . you're with us. All the way."

"Aw, man . . ." David began.

But I wasn't giving any of them a chance to back down. "Okay," I said quietly, still staring Carlos straight in the eye, "then I'm in on this. All the way. Right?"

The smile faded from Carlos's face when he realized what I was saying. His eyes begged forgiveness, pleading for me to let him off the hook. This was supposed to be a boys-only adventure; he had already imagined that I'd play the role of the girl he left behind. But I wasn't about to stand alone in the meadow, fretting for my lover after he'd gone away to sea. And he didn't know how to stop me from coming along.

"Yeah," he said. "Okay. Sure."

"All right, then." I released his arms. "So tell me where you're going."

Carlos gazed back at me. It took a minute, but the smile finally returned. "Let me show you."

He walked over to a shelf in the corner of the room, reached behind a row of paint cans to pull out a rolled-up sheet of paper: an orbital photo of New Florida, gridded as a map. Barry picked up the hand-made guitar Paul Dwyer had given him for his sixteenth birthday. As Carlos unscrolled the map across *Orion*'s bow, Barry sat down on a stool and idly strummed his instrument. David stood near the window, watching to see if anyone was approaching.

"We're going down Sand Creek, all the way to the Eastern Divide," he said quietly, speaking beneath the cover of Barry's guitar. "Once we're through Shapiro Pass, we'll hit the East Channel." He ran his finger down the broad river which separated New Florida from the small continent of Midland. "All we have to do is follow the channel to the southern end of the island, and we'll be in the Equi."

That was at least two hundred miles. By the time we reached the southeastern tip of New Florida, we'd be below Coyote's equator. "You're planning to paddle all that way?"

"Uh-uh. Won't need to." Chris had come up behind us. "Once we're in the channel, we can raise the sails, let the wind carry us up the coast. Shouldn't take more than a week or so."

"And that's the beauty of it." Carlos pointed to the broad delta that marked the confluence of the East Channel and the Great Equatorial River. "When we're past the equator, we can catch the westerly winds." He moved his finger across the southern end of New Island. "They'll carry us all the way up the Equi to the West Channel. By then, we'll be back in the northern equator once more, and that's where the wind patterns change again, moving to the east."

"Tack the sails the right way, and we can let it carry us straight up West Channel." Chris pointed to the river that divided New Florida from Great Dakota, the large continent that lay west of our island. He traced the West Channel almost to the northwestern tip of New Florida. "And here's the mouth of Sand Creek. All we have to do is paddle down it past Boid Creek . . ."

"And boom, we're home again." Carlos tapped the small X which marked the position of the colony. "By the time we're back, we'll have circled most of New Florida."

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I studied the map. "That's at least seven . . . eight hundred miles . . ."

"Eight hundred sixty miles, start to finish." Barry picked at his guitar, essaying an old Robert Johnson song. "More or less."

"We'll be the first to do it. " Carlos gazed fondly upon the map. "It'll be a long haul, but we'll see things no one has ever seen. We'll make history. . . ."

"How long?" I asked.

He raised his eyes, gazed at the others. "Four weeks. Maybe six. We'll get back some time in Hamaliel, I guess."

Nearly half a Coyote month from now, perhaps more. By then, it would be too late for a drug-induced abortion, and I knew that Kuniko would think twice about forcing me to undergo second-trimester surgery. And if I came home just a few weeks before First Landing Day, no one would be able to stop me from having the baby. . . .

"Sounds good to me," I said. "When do we leave?"

Carlos stared at me, and I prayed that he wouldn't realize that I had my own agenda. Chris sighed, walked away. David continued to gaze out the window. Barry, as always, held his own counsel; he continued playing "Crossroad Blues," pretending that he hadn't heard a word of what we'd said. I laid my hand across Carlos's and favored him with a disingenuous smile, and knew that he couldn't reject me.

"Day after tomorrow," he said, almost a whisper. "We're taking off early, just before dawn. Think you can make it?"

"Sure," I said. "I don't have any other plans."

The next day, things began to mysteriously vanish throughout Liberty.

Nothing that would be missed immediately—a flashlight here, an electronic compass there—or at least until the culprits had long since vanished. We pretended to go about our business much the same as always, but each of us had our own shopping list, and when the moment was right something else would disappear under our shirts or down our pants. As luck would have it, it was my turn to help to clean up after lunch in the community mess hall; once the cooks left the kitchen, it was easy to raid the pantry and fill an old grain bag with salted meat and preserved vegetables, along with some plates, cups, and cookware.

I felt more than a small twinge of guilt, but it had to be done; we couldn't set forth into the wilderness with only the clothes on our backs, and we needed this stuff. I salved my conscience by reminding myself that what we were doing was no worse than what the *Alabama* conspirators had done 229 years ago when they hijacked a one hundred billion dollar starship. If we were caught, we could always blame our elders for setting a bad example.

The most difficult task was acquiring firearms. The armory was located in a locked closet inside the grange; only the Prefects and a couple of Council members had keys, and every gun had to be signed out with Ellery Balis, the quartermaster. But Carlos had already devised a solution; Lew Geary had started letting him into his cantina, and as a regular patron, he knew that one of the blue-shirts, Michael Geissal, was in the habit of dropping by for a drink after his shift ended. So Carlos hung out with Mike and tipped a few mugs with him, and when he was good and drunk, Carlos helped him stagger home, during which time he artfully deprived him of his key-ring. One more reason to disappear for a few months: when Michael figured out what happened, he'd probably want to feed Carlos to the hogs.

For my part, I played things as quietly as possible. It wasn't easy; Kuniko

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doted upon me all evening, beginning with a special dinner she'd cooked on my behalf. Chicken was tightly rationed, as precious as a replacement microchip, but nonetheless she'd used up four weeks worth of food-chits to acquire a fresh-killed and cleaned bird from the livestock pen. When she placed a whole roasted chicken on the table, I knew what she was trying to do: make up for pushing me into the abortion she'd perform tomorrow. I wasn't hungry—too nervous about what I was soon to do—so I was only able to force down a few bites before I pushed back my plate. Kuni misinterpreted this as anxiety about the procedure; while we were washing up, she told me again how easy it would be, that I had nothing to worry about, and how no one would ever know. I listened until she was done, then excused myself and went to my room.

When she checked in on me an hour or so later, I was curled in bed with my pad, reading *The Chronicles of Prince Rupurt*. She asked how I was doing, and when I looked up I could see the love in her eyes. My mother was a woman I barely remembered, my father a near-stranger with whom I'd shared only a few scattered months of my life. Kuniko Okada was the nearest thing I ever had to a family. Stealing food didn't bother me very much, but betraying Kuni's trust was like sticking a knife in her back. For a moment, I was tempted to tell her, but that was clearly out of the question, so I told her I was okay, just feeling a little tired. Kuniko hesitated for a moment, then she wished me good night and left, closing the door behind her.

After awhile, I closed my pad and shut off the oil lamp next to my bed. A thin slit of light gleamed through the crack beneath the door. Kuniko moved around the house for a little while longer, the floor boards creaking softly beneath her moccasins, then the light disappeared. Her bedroom door opened, slammed shut. And now the house was still.

I tried to make myself go to sleep. I needed all the rest I could get, but that didn't help very much; instead, I lay awake in the darkness, staring up through the window at the night sky. Bear hung above town, a pale blue orb four times the size of the Moon, its ring-plane reflecting the light of 47 Ursae Majoris. I remembered the long nights I'd spent in government youth hostels, lying awake in my narrow bunk, one hand on the sawed-off baseball bat I kept beneath the sheets in case one of the councilors again tried to rape me. Back then, all I'd ever wanted was freedom. Now I had my chance . . . and it scared the hell out of me.

I must have dozed off, because the chime of my pad startled me from what felt like sleep. I fumbled for it in the darkness, switched it off, then lay still for a few moments. The house remained quiet; when I didn't hear any movement, I pushed aside the covers and reached for the clothes I had placed beneath the bed. No time for hesitation or second thoughts; if I didn't go now, it would be too late.

I had already made up a bedroll with an extra set of clothing tucked inside, fastened together by a belt. I eased open my window and dropped the bedroll outside. This way, if Kuni happened to wake up and see me leaving, I could always tell her I was visiting the privy.

Yet her door remained shut as I crept through the cabin. I had a momentary urge to write her a note, explaining what I was doing and why, but the boys were probably already at the boat house, and I was worried that they might take off without me. So I gently closed the front door behind me, and tried not to think very hard about what I was doing.

The first light of day tinted the sky purple as I hurried down Main Street.

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No one was in sight and the windows of the cabins I passed were still dark, but the roosters were starting to crow; in just a little while, the town would begin to wake up. Kuniko liked to sleep late, but it wouldn't be long before Sissy Levin or Jack and Lisa Dreyfus discovered that their boys weren't in their beds, or Marie Montero would tell Kim Newell that her brother was gone.

Everything was quiet on the path leading to the boat house, save for the chitter of grasshoarders, but as I drew closer, I could make out muted voices. For once, Star didn't run out to greet me; Carlos must have decided to leave the dog behind. For a moment, I thought I heard someone behind me, but when I glanced back the way I came, I saw no one.

David was standing lookout on the porch; he seemed disappointed when he saw me. "What took you so long?" he whispered as I jogged up the steps. "Forget your teddy bear?"

"Stick it," I muttered. I was in no mood to argue with the brat. The canoes were already in the water, tied up on either side of the dock. Barry and Chris were loading the last of the supplies, carefully placing them in the middle of each boat and covering them with tarps. Unlike David, they were pleased to see me; they both grinned as I walked out onto the dock.

"Morning, gentlemen," I said, keeping my voice low. "Permission to come aboard?"

"Aye, m'lady. Glad to see you made it." Barry took the bedroll from my arms. "Anyone see you. . . ?"

"Uh-uh. Kuni's still in bed." I glanced from one canoe to the other. Both were packed almost full. "Umm . . . which one am I supposed to be in?"

Chris and Barry gave each other an uncertain look, then Chris made a tentative gesture toward the *Pleiades*. "I can take you in my . . ."

"You're coming with me."

Carlos emerged from the boat house's back door. Carrying an automatic rifle in each hand, wearing a catskin vest and with his hair tied back, he resembled a hero from a nineteenth century frontier novel. Natty Bumpo on Coyote; James Fenimore Cooper would have appreciated the imagery. Perhaps he was self-conscious of what he looked like, because he gave me an abashed grin. "If you don't mind, that is," he added.

Right. Like I'd refuse. Perhaps it wasn't the best moment to do so, but I practically skipped over to fling my arms around him. He couldn't hug me back, but I didn't care, nor did I pay much attention to the sullen glare Chris gave us or the disgusted look on David's face. Only Barry didn't seem to mind; he stepped forward to relieve Carlos of the guns, then gallantly looked away as he handed one to Chris.

"I'm so glad you're here," Carlos whispered. Now that his hands were free, he was able to return my embrace. "I couldn't do this without you."

"Neither could I." *And you don't know the half of it*, I silently added.

We held each other until Barry cleared his throat. "Umm . . . this is really sweet, but unless we shake a leg . . ."

"Yeah, sure. You're right." Carlos let me loose, but not before patting me on the rump. He gestured toward the *Orion*. "We've saved a place for you behind the sailboard. It'll be a little tight, but you can sit on your bag and . . ."

"Don't worry about it. I'll manage." Barry had already tucked my bedroll into a small space directly behind the horizontal plank where the mast eventually would be mounted. It was going to be cramped, but I figured I could lean back and stretch out my legs once we were underway. "Do you want me to paddle or . . ."

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"Uh-uh. Just ride . . . at least for the time being." His hand on my waist, Carlos led me to the canoe. "You can take over in the bow if Barry gets tired, or help rig the sail once we get past the Divide, but for now all you have to do is . . ."

"So that's where you're going," Kuniko said.

I looked around, and there she was.

Mothers can surprise you that way, even adoptive ones. When it comes to their kids, they've got their own built-in radar, and are sometimes capable of performing amazing feats of telepathy. Just when you think you've gotten away from them, you find they've been tracking you all along.

My mother passed away when I was very young, but Kuniko had become enough of a surrogate that I didn't have to ask how she'd figured out I was planning to run away with my boyfriend. The only surprise was that she'd managed to follow me to the boat house without my catching on. Yet the moment I saw her, I knew she had probably stayed awake all night, waiting for me to make my move; the dark circles under her eyes attested to her lack of sleep.

The boys stared at her in dumbfounded shock. Barry and Chris were frozen in place, still holding the rifles in their hands. David looked down at the dock, muttered an obscenity beneath his breath. Carlos was red-faced; his hand quickly slipped away from me, as if he was a shoplifter caught with the merchandise.

"It's just a little fishing trip . . ." he began.

"Oh, please." Kuniko silenced him with a sharp look. "Don't lie to me. That's worse than anything else you could do." Then she spotted the guns, and her eyes narrowed. "Almost worse. You broke into the armory to get those, didn't you?" No one replied. "Thought so," she murmured. "You're going to catch hell for this."

As she marched onto the dock. David stepped in front of her; one look at Kuniko's face and he hastily moved aside. She glanced at the fully loaded canoes, shook her head. "Figured it might be something like this. I heard folks complaining all day about losing stuff. After awhile it began to add up." She glanced at Barry, then Chris. "Both of you dropped by the infirmary yesterday. So which one took off with a med kit?"

"It was me, ma'am," Barry said quietly. "If you want it back, I can dig it out."

Kuniko glared at him, but didn't reply. Instead, she turned to Carlos. "You're usually the leader, so I take it this is your idea. Right?" He nodded. "So what makes you think you've got such a great plan?"

"I . . . I don't . . . I mean . . ."

"Oh, never mind. You've already shown that you're a thief and a liar. Maybe it's too much for you to be intelligent, too." She was quiet for a moment. "You know, all I have to do is run back into the town and yell for help. In five minutes, I can have twenty people down here. Even if you push off before then, you wouldn't get very far."

Carlos opened his mouth, then closed it. He knew she was right. There were three two-man kayaks in the boat house; anyone using them wouldn't be burdened with all the equipment we were carrying. Even with a good head start, we'd only get a couple of miles downstream before they overtook us.

"Yes, ma'am," he admitted. "I know that." He hesitated. "So why aren't you. . . ?"

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"I didn't say I would, and I didn't say I wouldn't. So be smart and shut up." Then she turned to me. "C'mon. I want to talk to you."

My face was burning as Kuniko led me to the boat house. She didn't say anything until we were out of earshot of the boys; she opened the back door, ushered me inside, and slammed it behind us.

"What have you told him?" Her face was only a few inches from mine, her voice very low.

"I . . . I . . ."

"Damn it, Wendy, what have you told him?"

Tears spilled from the corners of my eyes. "I . . . I haven't . . . he doesn't know."

"Are you sure? You're haven't said. . . ?"

"No! Kuni, I swear, I didn't tell him anything. . . !"

"Shh! Keep it down." She gave me a hard shake. "Okay, I believe you. Now, next question . . . do you want to have this child? I mean, do you really want to go all the way with this?"

"Yes." I looked her straight in the eye. "Yes, I do."

Which was a lie. Or, at least, it wasn't the complete truth. The truth of the matter, which I couldn't admit even to myself, was that I wasn't sure of anything, save for the fact that I didn't want an abortion.

Yet I knew that if I hedged in any way, Kuniko would make good on her threat to run into town and alert the Prefects. Then we'd all be disgraced; the guys would stand trial for theft and probably spend hard time in the stockade, and the truth would inevitably come out that I was pregnant. Even if I was allowed to give birth—and the Council would have to overturn Colony Law to give me that privilege—I'd doubtless be shunned by the community. Carlos's reputation would be ruined, and no one would ever again trust Chris, David, or Barry.

I lied to protect my friends, because I loved them. At least that's what I told myself. I may have even believed it.

Kuniko regarded me for a few moments, as if trying to decide for herself whether I was being honest. At last, she nodded. "All right, then. I suppose that doesn't leave me with much choice."

She walked to the front door. For a second, I thought she was about to return to town and alert the blue-shirts; I raised my hand to stop her, then stopped when she opened the door, reached outside, and picked up the backpack she had left on the deck. A small bedroll was strapped across the top. Shutting the door behind her, she turned to face me again.

"Seeing that you haven't told anyone," she said quietly, "you're going to need someone to take care of you."

"Kuniko. . . !"

She shook her head. "Sorry, kid. That's the way it is." Without another glance in my direction, she slung the pack across her shoulder and walked past me to the back door. "Let's go tell your boyfriend he's got another passenger."

Needless to say, Carlos wasn't pleased. Whatever he imagined his grand adventure to be like, it hadn't involved being chaperoned. There was a brief face-off between him and Kuniko on the dock; he tried to talk her down, but Kuniko remained adamant: either she went with us, or I would return to the town with her and she'd alert the Prefects. As with me, she refused to give him any other options.

By now, the sun was coming up. We didn't have much time left. Carlos

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cast me a sullen glare, then looked back at Kuniko. "Okay, whatever," he murmured, and impatiently motioned toward the *Pleiades*. "You'll ride with Chris and David."

"Thank you." Kuniko handed her pack to David, who reluctantly took it and shoved it into the canoe next to the rest of the belongings. Chris was already seated in the stern; he made no effort to help Kuniko climb aboard. She looked out of place, a grown woman scrunched into a narrow boat between two teenage boys, but she managed to maintain her dignity.

Carlos refused to look at me as he clambered into the stern of the *Orion*. He reached back to untie one of the lines holding us to the dock; in the bow, Barry did the same. "Cast off," he said, then used the butt of his paddle to push us away.

Slowly, the *Orion* drifted out into the shallow creek. Carlos turned the long canoe to starboard, then dipped his paddle into the brown water and guided us into the current. The *Pleiades* fell in behind us as we passed the dock; David and Chris were scowling as they swung their oars, yet I was startled to see a broad grin on Kuniko's face. She caught my eye and gave me a wink.

"She'd better pull her own weight," Carlos said quietly, "or I'll put her off and make her walk home."

"Oh, no, you won't." I looked over my shoulder to give him the coldest look I could manage. "Do that, and I'll never sleep with you again."

That shut him up. Truth was, Carlos had never slept with me; what we had done together had been in a few stolen minutes behind the grange. Yet although I was speaking figuratively, he accepted it as literal truth. And Barry, as always, remained quiet, his back turned toward us.

I moved around a little, trying to settle my cramped legs into a position where they wouldn't lose circulation, and tucked my hands beneath my armpits against the morning cool. A light fog lay above Sand Creek, dissipating as the sun touched the waters with its warmth. To the right, I could see the rooftops of town. Within a few minutes, they disappeared behind a thicket of spider brush, and we were all alone.

We had left Liberty. Ahead lay the wilderness.

The boys were in a hurry to put as much distance between us and town as they possibly could. They paddled constantly, seldom giving themselves a moment to rest. It was only a matter of time before Barry's parents or Chris and David's mother wised up to the fact that their sons had run off. Nor would Kim Newell be reticent about sounding the alarm; Carlos didn't tell us then, but he'd already informed his sister of what he was planning to do, and sworn her to silence until we were gone.

So they denied themselves a break until mid-day, when we reached the shallow sandbar that marked the junction of Levin Creek. This was the farthest point anyone had previously ventured south of Liberty; had we chosen to venture down the narrow tributary, we would have soon come to the place where Chris and David's father was killed. The brothers weren't thrilled to be here, but Carlos chose this place for us to drop anchor while we had a quick lunch.

The day had become warm and humid; David and Barry had long since taken off their sweat-stained shirts, and Carlos and Chris took the opportunity to remove their own. I had shucked my sweater and desperately wanted to peel down to my halter, but somehow it didn't feel right. Kuniko must have sensed this; without comment, she unbuttoned her shirt and pulled it

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off, revealing the bikini bra beneath it. Chris, Barry, and Carlos pretended nonchalance, but David openly leered at her. She stared back at him until he turned red and looked away. Kuniko gave me an encouraging smile, and I no longer felt quite as bashful; off went my shirt, and Barry splashed David with his paddle when he tried to give me the eye.

When we were through eating, everyone started to tuck away the food wrappers, but then Carlos had another idea. He collected them, then got out of the canoe, waded ashore and littered the banks of Levin Creek with our trash. "When someone finds them," he said as he walked back through the shallows, "they'll think we went that way."

The others were impressed by his ingenuity, but Kuniko shook her head. "Nice thought, but what makes you think they'll come after us by water?" Their smiles faded as she wiped her mouth with a bandanna. "All they have to do is launch a shuttle and follow us downstream." She casually gazed back in the direction of town. "In fact, we should be seeing them any minute now."

"You'd like that, wouldn't you?" Carlos asked. He was still in the water, standing between the two canoes. "All this effort, just to be carried back by the scruff of our necks."

Kuniko didn't reply, but I noticed the smug expression on David's face. "They're going to have a hard time flying the shuttles if they can't take off," he said.

Kuniko gave him a baffled look. "We removed a little something from the cockpits, " Carlos explained. "A small piece of hardware from both ships. If they try to start the engines, the comps will shut 'em down."

"You little idiots!" Kuniko stared at him in horror. "Do you know what you've done?"

I couldn't believe it either. The *Mayflower* and the *Plymouth* weren't just the colony's sole means of long-range transport; they were also the only way anyone could return to the *Alabama*. If they were grounded, there was no way we could retrieve the remaining livestock embryos from biostasis. Nor were there any spare parts for any of their Earth-manufactured components, which was why they were so seldom used.

"You think I'm stupid?" David asked, as Kuniko started to reach for her pack. "Don't worry . . . they're not damaged. Safe as can be, I promise."

Yet Carlos was no longer smiling. "What are you looking for?"

Kuniko froze, her hands on the half-open flap of her pack. "None of your business."

Carlos sighed, shook his head. He walked over to where Kuniko was sitting in the *Pleiades*. "Hand it over."

"I don't know what you're . . ."

"Carlos," I said, "don't . . ."

"Wendy, please . . ." Carlos continued to stare at Kuniko. "C'mon, Doc. You're holding out on us." He cast a meaningful look at Chris and David; they were ready to climb out of the canoe if he said so. He put out his hand. "Fork it over."

Kuniko glared back at him, then her shoulders slumped. Her right hand disappeared within her pack, returned a moment later holding a small plastic unit. A satphone: once its parabolic antenna was unfolded, it was capable of transmitting a signal to the *Alabama* as it passed over, which in turn would bounce it back to Liberty. The colony had only a dozen satphones; as chief physician, Kuniko was entrusted with one of them.

With no small reluctance, she surrendered the unit to Carlos. He opened

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it, but didn't deploy the antenna. "I had to bring it," she said. "That's my job. I'm a doctor."

"Yeah, well . . ." Carlos closed the satphone. "You've brought your med kit, too, right?" Kuniko nodded. "So you shouldn't need this."

"Carlos, don't . . ."

Then he drew back his arm and pitched the satphone as far as he could throw it.

The little unit sailed upward and away, making an arc above Sand Creek, before plummeting into the water a couple of dozen yards away. It disappeared with a splash that probably disturbed a few fish.

"Yeah!" David pumped his fist in the air. "Another blow for freedom!" Chris gave an uncertain grin. Barry, taciturn as always, simply looked away.

I thought Kuniko would yell at him. Instead, she regarded Carlos with a sympathetic expression; she hadn't even bothered to see which way he had thrown the satphone. "Thank you," she said quietly, and he stared back at her. "I called you an idiot, and you've just proven me right. Now I'm even more valuable to you than I was before."

Before he could ask why, she turned her back to him. "Lunchtime's over. Time to go."

We followed Sand Creek as it meandered through the marshland, sometimes allowing the canoes to drift with the current. Curious swoops followed us from time to time, spying upon us from high above before gliding away on their broad wings. Once we spotted a creek cat half-concealed within a spider bush, frozen in place while taking a drink, its amber eyes locked upon us. We passed a few more tributaries, and gradually the creek grew broader, its banks farther apart.

Late in the afternoon, we came upon a small, shrub-covered island in the middle of the stream. Carlos called back to Chris, asked him if he wanted to pull over for the night. He seemed reluctant, but everyone was exhausted; paddling heavy canoes is hard work even if you're not carrying passengers. And the island was a good place to camp; it would be more difficult for boids to get to us if we were surrounded by water. So we beached the canoes on the tip of the island and waded ashore, our legs stiff after long hours sitting in the boats.

We had two tents, each large enough for three people. While Barry, Kuniko, and I set them up, David scouted for firewood. Carlos and Chris unloaded the supplies we'd need for the night, then unfolded the map and tried to figure out where we were. The map didn't show much detail, and we were the first to explore this end of Sand Creek; so far as they could tell, we had traveled about twenty miles, and were a little more than halfway to the Eastern Divide.

Not bad for the first day, but Chris believed that we'd probably encounter white water once we reached the Shapiro Pass; they might be easy to navigate in kayaks, but it would be more difficult for fully laden canoes to get through the shoals. Carlos argued that, if bad came to worse, we could go ashore, unload the canoes and portage them across dry land until we were clear of the rapids.

That was a problem for tomorrow, though, and we were too tired to think about it now. As the sun went down, David set fire to the small pile of driftwood he'd scavenged. We roasted some salted pork and a few potatoes; after dinner, Barry pulled out his guitar while Carlos produced a catskin flask of

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sourgrass ale and passed it around. With our stomachs full and the ale beginning to hit us, after a while we started to relax. We talked about small things. The night sky was clear, and soon the stars came out; we couldn't yet see Bear, but the leading edge of its ring-plane rose above the horizon. Off in the distance, we could hear the boids cry, yet they never got very close to us. It was easy to pretend that we were on a camping trip; no one was worried about what lay before us.

There was only one sour moment, and that was when we went to bed. Just as Barry was gathering water to throw on the fire and Kuniko was packing away the cookware, Carlos stood up and stretched, then announced that he and I were taking the tent on the left. This was news just as much to me as it was to the others; Chris and David glanced at each other, then at Barry, then at Kuniko. What, the four of them were supposed to squeeze into one tent while Carlos and I shared the honeymoon suite? Yet Carlos seemed to assume that this was what I wanted to do; he took me by the hand, and, without so much as saying good-night to the others, tugged me toward the tent.

Carlos had already laid out his bedroll; as soon as he closed the tent flap behind us, he began pulling off his clothes. Sex was the farthest thing from my mind; I could barely keep my eyes open, and all I really wanted to do was sleep. But soon he was half-naked, sitting up on his knees and stroking my back even before I had finished untying my bedroll. In retrospect, I think he'd entertained fantasies of this moment for many months: him and me, alone in a tent on our own little island. . . .

A couple of days ago, it might have been my fantasy as well. Yet we weren't alone any more, and the way that he had treated Kuniko today irritated me. I was trying to think of a way to turn him down that wouldn't hurt his feelings when someone opened the tent.

I looked around to see Kuniko crawl inside, pulling her bedroll behind her. She said nothing, but the cold glare she gave Carlos caused him to move away from me. Then, without a word, she threw down her bedroll and began to lay it out between us.

From somewhere outside, I heard muffled laughter from the Levin brothers; Barry murmured something, and they quickly shut up. Carlos fumed, but he remained quiet; he must have realized any argument was pointless. Kuniko was sleeping with us tonight whether he liked it or not. I favored him with an apologetic smile, and he scowled as he put his shirt back on. Kuniko either didn't notice or pretended not to; she removed her boots, placed them behind her, then pulled aside her blanket and stretched out, separating Carlos from me with her body.

And that was the way we slept, not only that night, but for many nights thereafter. To be quite honest, I preferred it that way.

It wasn't until much later that I learned what happened back in Liberty.

Our escape wasn't as close as we'd imagined, because our absence wasn't immediately noticed. When Sissy Levin awoke to discover that Chris and David weren't home, she assumed that they had merely gotten up early to go fishing; it wasn't until mid-morning that Kim Newell dropped by to ask whether she'd seen Carlos. More mystified than alarmed, Sissy and Kim found Marie Montero and asked her where her brother had gone. Carlos might have sworn his kid sister to secrecy, but it didn't take much to make the little girl break down in tears and tell the grown-ups what she knew.

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In the meantime, Michael Geissal had awakened with a wretched hangover and the realization that he had somehow misplaced his key-ring. He was still searching his cabin when Ellery Balis showed up at his place, keys in hand. Two rifles were missing from the armory, and the quartermaster wanted to know why he'd found Mike's keys dangling from the lock. The hapless blue-shirt swore up and down that he hadn't visited the grange since the end of his shift the night before, and that he had no idea how he had lost his keys.

Ellery told him that they needed to see Captain Lee about this; the theft of two rifles was a serious matter. They were headed down Main Street to the mayor's house when they were approached by Sissy and Kim. Chris, David, and Carlos had run away, the women were in near-panic, and that was when Mike remembered Carlos having helped him stagger home from the cantina.

As it turned out, Captain Lee was already aware that the boys were missing; Jack and Lisa Dreyfus had found the brief note Barry'd left on his bed. Since the note mentioned me by name, everyone trooped down to Kuniko's house. She and I were long-gone, of course, but Kuniko had left behind a letter of her own. Robert Lee found it on her examination table; he read it once, then folded it and put it his pocket without letting anyone else see it.

Liberty was still a small settlement in those days, so it's no surprise that news traveled fast. From what we were later told, it was Mike's idea to go after us; angry that he had been duped so easily, he rounded up a posse of three other Prefects and they went to the boathouse with the intent of pursuing us down Sand Creek. Yet as soon they dropped a couple of kayaks in the water, the boats sprung leaks; someone had drilled neat little holes in their hulls. It wasn't until nearly noon that anyone considered launching a shuttle to go searching for us, and it took another hour for Jud Tinsley to discover that both the *Mayflower* and the *Plymouth* had been sabotaged.

About the same time we'd stopped near Levin Creek to have lunch, the Town Council convened in emergency session. Captain Lee did his best to keep everyone calm; he reported the theft of the canoes, guns, and various supplies, but also mentioned that Kuniko's satphone was missing as well. The fact that Dr. Okada had decided to join us instead of blowing the whistle was a source of much speculation until Lee produced the letter he'd found and read it aloud. He then gave his opinion that pursuit was out of the question until the missing shuttle components were located; on the other hand, there was some small degree of comfort in the knowledge that a responsible adult was with us, and she had the ability to make contact with Liberty.

The satphone now lay at the bottom of Sand Creek, but they couldn't have known that. The only thing anyone knew was that five teenagers and an adult had gone off by themselves. After much discussion, the council decided there was no real reason to worry. This was clearly a case of adolescent rebellion. We were just some crazy kids sowing our wild oats; in a few days, we'd get tired of our little adventure and come back on our own.

There was nothing to worry about. Nothing at all.

We rose shortly after dawn, while the morning was still cool and a silver mist lingered over the island. A quick breakfast of cold cereal and coffee, then we broke camp and loaded the canoes. I switched places with Barry in the bow of the *Orion*; his right shoulder was sore from having pulled a mus-

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cle the day before, and I was tired of being a passenger. Although Carlos wasn't saying much to me this morning—he was still miffed about the night before—he didn't object. Kuniko offered to relieve David in the bow of the *Pleiades,* but he rudely insisted that he was doing okay. We cast off with the sun rising to the east and Bear directly above us: a clear morning, with no clouds in sight.

Sand Creek continued to broaden, and within a couple of hours we could no longer see the stream bottom. I had no problem adjusting to the work of hauling the heavy canoe; the current had become swift, and I was able to rest now and then. There was none of the urgency we'd felt yesterday; if anyone from Liberty was coming after us, they would have caught up with us by now. So our pace was almost leisurely, and by late morning we were within sight of the Eastern Divide.

Most of New Florida was flat terrain, fresh-water marshes only a couple of feet above what passed for sea-level on Coyote. The Eastern Divide was the sole exception: a long, steep limestone wall looming above the grasslands, formed ages ago by the tectonic fault that ran beneath the East Channel. Over the course of countless years, the creek had eroded a narrow canyon through the wall; it was through the Shapiro Pass that we'd leave the inland.

I spotted a pair of swoops perched upon a limb of a blackwood. Swoops had always fascinated me, and since we were heading in the same direction they'd migrated toward late last autumn, I hoped we'd discover where they spent the winter. But now, staring down at us, they looked less like raptors than vultures anticipating their next meal. Feeling a chill, I took a moment to unwrap my sweater from around my waist and put it on again.

Shortly after noon, just before we entered Shapiro Pass, we paddled into a shallow cove to take a lunch break. We nibbled some dried fruit and biscuits and tried to make light conversation, but it was obvious that everyone was nervous about the rapids. When Barry offered to take over the bow, I didn't protest; we'd need someone with white-water experience to get through the pass.

Kuniko climbed out of the *Pleiades,* waded to the front of the canoe. "You too," she said to David, picking up his oar from where he had laid it across the gunnels. "I'll take over from here."

David didn't budge. He looked straight ahead as he gnawed at his biscuit. "No way, bitch. . . ."

She slapped him.

Not all that hard, but enough to knock the half-eaten biscuit from his mouth. "First, don't ever call me that again," she said, in an almost casual tone of voice which nonetheless had an edge to it. "In fact, if you ever address me as anything other than 'ma'am' or 'Dr. Okada,' I'll remove your teeth through nonsurgical means. Are we clear on that, David?"

David glared up at her. His chin trembled, and his face was bright red where she had struck him. A tear crept down the side of his face. Everyone had gone silent; we could hear the skeeters buzzing around us, the water lapping against the side of the canoes.

"Y-y-yes, ma'am," he whispered.

"Good. Second . . . the reason why I'm taking over is that you're . . . what? Thirteen? Fourteen? I'm thirty-six, which makes me stronger than you are. If you don't believe it, we can go ashore and I'll continue your lessons in proper etiquette. Do you believe me, David?"

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"Yes, ma'am." Very quietly, and with no argument.

"Good. You've done fine, but we need more muscle right now, and you just don't have it. So climb in the back . . . please."

David hesitated. He glanced back at Chris, who suddenly looked as if he wished he could claim his brother had been adopted, then he reluctantly stepped out of the bow seat, and, head down, began sloshing his way toward the middle of the boat. "Thank you, David," Kuniko said, and waited until he was back aboard before she climbed into the boat. She picked up her paddle, glanced at the others. "Everyone rested? Had enough to eat? Pee'd and everything?"

I could have used a squat in the woods, but just then Kuniko scared me more than the rapids. I dumbly nodded, just like everyone else. "Good," she said. "Then let's get going. The day's getting late."

She thrust the handle of her oar into the water and shoved off, then switched her grip on the oar and backpaddled to move the *Pleiades* away from shore. Her boat was already turned around by the time Barry pushed off the *Orion*. She didn't pay attention to me, but Carlos had a mean look on his face.

"So who died and made her God?" he muttered.

"I dunno." I thought about it a moment. "Maybe God likes her more than you."

He didn't appreciate that, but if he had a good answer, it didn't come to him. But when Barry glanced back at me, there was a subtle smile on his face. He and I shared a secret moment of understanding, and then he turned and put his back to the oar.

An hour later, we were within the shadow of the Eastern Divide, approaching the Shapiro Pass.

By now, the current had turned swift. It carried us toward a deep gorge where great limestone bluffs towered above us like chalky white battlements. Here and there along the edge of the creek, massive boulders jutted above the surface, the water foaming as it surged around the rocks. We could no longer feel the sun upon us; a steady breeze moved through the pass, blowing cold spray into our faces. From somewhere not far ahead, we could hear a muted roar.

We'd moved ahead of the *Pleiades,* and Carlos yelled back to the other canoe, telling them to stay in the middle of the stream; it was deeper here, and we'd pass over the rocks. But not much deeper; glancing over the side, I could see gravel bottom racing past us. If we capsized, the undertow could pull us down before we'd have a chance to swim to safety. Suddenly, I was all too conscious of the fact that none of us wore life-jackets.

I looked back at Carlos. He caught my eye, gave me a smile. "Don't worry about it," he said quietly. "My ol' man and I used to white-water all the time. This'll be . . ."

"Rapids!" Barry shouted.

I stared past him. Seated where I was, I couldn't see anything, yet a moment later there was a hard thump against the bottom of the canoe as its keel grazed an unseen boulder. *Orion* rocked back and forth; I grasped the gunnels and watched as Barry hastily switched his paddle from the right to the left, thrusting its blade deep into the water, deftly j-stroking away from the rocks.

I heard a whoop from behind us. The *Pleiades* was only a half-dozen yards

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away, its prow leaping above the water before plunging back down again. Grinning like a madman, Chris was enjoying every moment of the ride, but David's head lolled forward between his raised knees; his eyes were shut, and he looked nauseous. In the bow, Kuniko's face was grim; her arms pumped at her oar as her eyes searched the churning water ahead, wary for any more potholes. Perhaps this was a game for Chris, but she knew the danger we were in.

"Hey!" Barry yelled. "Something moved . . . ahead to the right, on the rocks!"

I turned my head, looked around. For a moment, I didn't see what he was talking about. Then a tall, angular shape flitted across the narrow bank running between the creek and the bottom of the bluff. It turned toward us, and suddenly I caught a glimpse of an enormous beak. . . .

"Boid!" Carlos shouted.

A cold hand reached into my chest. He was right; one of the flightless avians that haunted the grasslands had found its way into the pass. Perhaps it had ventured here in search of small animals; whatever the reason, there it was, and in seconds we'd come within only a few yards of it.

"Don't worry!" Chris shouted. "It's on the shore! It can't. . . !"

As if to defy him, the boid let out a terrible screech, which echoed off the bluffs. Then, in one swift move, it leaped onto a midstream boulder, and, raising its hooked foreclaws, bounded to another boulder closer to the middle of the channel. The boid saw us coming; rapids or no rapids, it wasn't going to let a potential meal slip past.

"Gimme the gun!" Carlos took a hand off his paddle, began groping behind me for the automatic rifle he'd stowed next to the mast.

"Watch out!" Kuniko shouted. "Rudder left!"

An instant later the *Orion*'s bow sideswiped a boulder that we could have avoided if Carlos had been in control. The canoe tipped to the right; icy water rushed over the side and for a terrifying moment I thought we were going to capsize, but then its keel smacked the water again. We were safe, but not for long; now we were caught in the rapids and heading straight for the boid.

Something took hold of me. Survival intuition, perhaps, or maybe just common sense. Yet before I knew it, the rifle was in my hands.

"The gun!" Carlos yelled. "Wendy, gimme the gun!"

I ignored him as I flipped off the safety and toggled the infrared rangefinder. I raised the rifle and settled its stock against my right shoulder. A holographic sight appeared a few inches in front of my right eye; its bullseye shifted from blue to red as I moved the rifle toward the left, trying to get a bead on the boid standing on the boulder ahead of us.

The canoe scraped against another boulder, throwing me off balance. I steadied the rifle again, stared down the barrel. Now Barry was in the way; I couldn't get a clear shot. And the boid was crouching upon its long, backward-jointed legs, preparing to lunge at the canoe.

"Barry, get down!"

He threw himself forward across the bow deck, almost losing his paddle. The bullseye strobed as I got a fix on the boid's tufted forehead just above its angry parrot eyes.

I took a deep breath, held it, and gently pulled back on the trigger. There was only the slightest recoil as the rifle shuddered within my hands.

A loud *bwaaap!* and then the boid's cranium exploded.

Blood and cartilage sprayed across the rock. Its beak sagged open, almost

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as if in surprise, as the creature jerked spasmodically. Then it toppled sideways and fell off the boulder. It hit the water with a loud splash; the current swallowed its corpse and swept it away.

I lowered the gun. Barry sat up again; his mouth hung open in mute shock, then he remembered where he was and shoved the butt of his paddle against the boulder, pushing us away before we collided with it.

I heard a ragged cheer, looked around to see the *Pleiades* rushing past; Chris was grinning at me, and David was pumping the air with his fist. I caught a brief glimpse of Kuniko's face; she was ashen, but managed to give me a quick smile.

Carlos said nothing. When I glanced back at him, he was struggling to get us back into the middle of the stream; he didn't seem to want to look at me. I was about to say something when the canoe hit another pothole.

I grabbed the sailboard as a bucketful of cold water dashed me square in the face. When the canoe was steady again, I snapped the rifle's safety, then braced it between my legs and held onto the gunnels. No time for discussion; we still had to do battle with the rapids.

We fought our way down the gorge, the canoes twisting left and right to avoid the rocks. Water flung high into the air and came back down upon us as a steady downpour, drenching us to our skins. Cursing the river and each other, Kuniko and Chris, Barry and Carlos struggled to keep their boats from being smashed or overturned, while David and I clung to whatever we could grasp. My neck aching from being whiplashed back and forth, my ears deafened by the constant roar, I stared at my knees and prayed that death would be swift, if not painless

And then, almost all at once, it ended.

Suddenly, there was no more violence, no more waves battering the canoe . . . just a sensation of slow, steady movement. Feeling warm sunlight against my face, I carefully raised my head.

The bluffs had disappeared. Now there was only a great expanse of blue water, still as a mirror under the sun. Upon the horizon, I could make out a thin dark line: a distant shore many miles away.

Unnerved by the abrupt silence, I pushed wet hair from my eyes, turned to gaze back. The Eastern Divide towered above us, a bleak limestone fortress from which we had managed to escape, broken only by the narrow crevice of the Shapiro Pass.

The *Pleiades* drifted a few dozen yards away. Kuniko and Chris were slumped in their seats, staring up at the rock wall. Barry groaned softly, fell back against the pack behind him. I turned to look back at Carlos; soaking wet, his chest rising and falling with every breath he took, he regarded the rugged escarpment through exhausted eyes.

Somehow, against all odds, we'd made it. We were now in the East Channel.

Crossing the Eastern Divide should have been the tough part, but it wasn't. We didn't know it then, but our troubles had just begun.

We didn't travel much farther down the channel that day. The rapids had drained us, and after an hour or so everyone agreed that it was probably best to pull over for the night. So we paddled along the bluffs until we found a narrow strip of sand where we could beach the canoes and set up camp. David gathered enough driftwood to build a small fire, then we fried some pork and beans and had an early dinner. We were tired and sore, and once the sun went down a stiff breeze moved through the channel and made

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everyone feel cold and miserable. It wasn't a good time to have a serious discussion, for under such circumstances even an innocuous question can spark a quarrel. Which is exactly what happened.

We were talking about the boid when Barry nudged my elbow. "Hey, nice shooting back there. I thought that thing was about to jump in the boat. Where'd you learn to use a gun?"

I swallowed a mouthful of beans. "Camp Schaefly, in Missouri. They required us to undergo paramilitary training . . . prepping us for the Service, that sort of thing. I was pretty good on the firing range."

Barry nodded knowingly—his parents were Party members, so he knew something about government youth hostels—but the other guys gave me a blank look. They were from well-off families; even though they were D.I.'s, no one had ever seriously suggested shipping them off to a hostel. That was something for vagrant kids like me: one parent dead, the other in the Service. And what little they did know came from govnet propaganda: well-scrubbed teens in clean uniforms, happily marching through the Colorado Rockies. They'd never spent a night in an overcrowded dorm, or been beaten up by a councilor, or nearly gang-raped in a shower stall.

"Good thing you grabbed the gun when you did," he said. "We had our hands full."

"I could have gotten it." From the other side of the fire, Carlos gave him a sharp look. "I was trying to get the gun, but she . . ."

"I know. That's when you lost control." Barry shrugged. "I guess I was supposed to steer while you were shooting."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing. I'm just glad your girlfriend was with us."

Carlos put his plate down, started to rise. "Whoa, take it easy," Kuniko said. "Cool off. No one meant anything." She glanced at Barry. "Right?"

Neither of them said anything, but Barry was the first to look away. After a moment Carlos picked up his plate and continued eating. A long silence. My beans had gone cold, but I ate anyway; no sense in letting food go to waste. But, man, did I have a craving for something with more salt in it. . . .

"Y'know," David said, "there's just one thing that bugs me." He gazed across the fire at Carlos. "If you're so good with a gun, then why didn't you shoot the boid that killed my dad?"

Carlos's eyes slowly rose. "What are you saying?"

"Just something I've always wondered about." David's tone remained nonchalant, almost conversational; he could have been discussing the weather. "It's just that . . . y'know, here you are, saying that you could have taken down the boid we saw today even though you were busy steering a canoe, but when you had a chance to kill the one that murdered my dad, you couldn't, even though you were on dry land." A shrug. "It's just a question. Take your time with it."

There was a coldness on Carlos's face I'd never seen before. The silence around the campfire became menacing. "Bro," Chris said, very quietly, "I'd leave that alone, if I were . . ."

David ignored his brother. "No reason to get upset. I'm curious, that's all, because the way I've heard it, you lowered your rifle when . . ."

The plate fell from Carlos's lap as he flung himself at David. Chris was sitting between them; he leaped to his feet and tried to stop Carlos, but Carlos knocked him aside as he charged David. The younger boy squawked and tried to run, but Carlos tackled him like a linebacker; the next instant,

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David was on the ground, his arms wrapped around his face, as Carlos pummeled him with his fists.

It wasn't much of a fight, nor did it last long. Barry grabbed Carlos from behind and pulled him off David. Tears mixing with the blood streaming from his nose, David tried to retaliate, but Kuniko forced herself between them, pushing them apart. Seeing the blood on his brother's face, Chris turned toward Carlos, but I interceded before another squabble could break out.

It took a lot of words, but eventually everyone eased down. Kuniko made the boys shake hands, which they did with great reluctance, then she led David to our tent to clean him up. Chris gave Carlos a long, hard look, then he stalked away. At a loss for anything else to do, Barry began gathering the cookware; it wasn't his turn to do the dishes, but David clearly wasn't up to it.

That left me with Carlos. Truth was, I really didn't want to be around him just now; David might have picked the fight, but it was Carlos who'd thrown the first punch. Yet even though I was having second thoughts about our relationship, I was still his girlfriend; it was my job to take care of him when he needed me. So I took him by the arm and we walked down the beach.

Once we were away from camp, we sat down on a rock next to the water. We watched Bear rise above the channel, listened to the tide lapping against the shore. I stroked his hair, tried to calm him down, and after awhile he put an arm around me. His breath shuddered out of him, and at last he spoke.

"He's right," he said, very softly. "About the boid hunt, I mean."

"What. . . ? No, he's not." I peered at him through the darkness. "I was at the meeting, remember? I heard what Dr. Johnson said. It killed Dr. Levin before anyone could fire, and when it went after the rest of you . . ."

"Henry didn't tell the whole truth." He swallowed, looked away from me. "Jim Levin was dead before anyone could do anything about it, sure, and I opened fire as soon as it started to attack, but . . ."

A long pause. "Go on," I whispered.

"When it went after Gill Reese, I lowered my rifle. I *could* have saved him, but . . ."

"Why didn't you?"

"Because . . ." Carlos hesitated. "I don't know. Maybe because he didn't save *my* folks when they were under his protection. Maybe because he was a loudmouth and he'd bullied everyone into making that trip with him. Maybe just because I wanted to see what he'd do when it was just between him and the boid, with no one to back him up." He put his head down. "That's why I wanted you to give me the gun. It was a second chance to . . ."

His voice trailed off, and that's when I realized why we were here. Through his own inaction, Carlos had let a man die. Perhaps it was Gill Reese and not Jim Levin, and David had heard the story wrong, and perhaps one could rationalize things by believing that Reese had it coming. Yet that wasn't the issue. Carlos had come face to face not only with the forces of nature, but also his own soul; he'd lost, and now he wanted a rematch. Only this time, he wanted someone to back him up: all his friends, including his girl. And if she was a better shot than he was, or if anyone reminded him why he was doing this . . .

"Carlos . . ." I said, and waited until he turned to me. His eyelids were half-lowered; I think he was expecting a kiss. And that made me even more mad.

"You and me are through," I finished.

"What. . . ?" Astonished, he stared at me. "Wendy, what. . . ?"

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"You heard me. We're over. Done." I pulled away from him.

"Wendy, jeez . . ." He grinned, took me by the hand. "C'mon, I'm sorry. If you're pissed about the thing with the gun . . ."

"The thing with the gun, yeah. And the thing with the satphone, the thing with the way you've treated Kuni, and . . . a lot of other things." I was tempted to tell him the rest; instead, I stood up. "But you're not the guy I thought you were, and I don't think I'm the girl you think *I* am."

"Wendy! What the hell. . . ?"

"Just leave me alone. I don't want to talk anymore." Then I turned and marched back to camp.

When I returned to our tent, I gathered up his bedroll and put it outside. Kuniko watched me do this, then went over to where Barry was washing the dishes and quietly invited him to spend the night with us. He moved his bedroll into our tent, and had enough common sense not to ask why we were changing our sleeping arrangements.

It was a long time before I fell asleep. Nonetheless, I didn't cry. Or at least, not then.

The next morning, we continued our journey down the East Channel.

Before we left shore, we hoisted the masts. Once we'd paddled the canoes into the channel, we unfurled the sails and stowed our oars. There was a steady breeze from the east that day; the wind caught the canvas sheets and billowed them outward, and soon we were cruising at about five knots. The bow of the *Orion* sliced through the dark blue water; I lay back against the gear and gazed up at the high bluffs of the Eastern Divide.

Carlos and I said little to each other, and although the canoes traveled close together, there wasn't much conversation among their crews. The events of the previous evening weighed heavily upon everyone; we all had a lot to think about. David pulled out a fishing rod, put a piece of leftover pork on the hook, and cast it over the starboard side of the *Pleiades.* Then he propped the pole between his knees, pulled his cap down low over his eyes, and dozed off. Barry pulled out his guitar and pensively strummed it as he sat in the bow of the *Orion*.

Shortly before noon, David's line went taut. The bail-arm of his reel snapped over, bringing him wide awake; grabbing the rod with both hands, he began to haul in whatever he'd caught. David might have been a smart-aleck, but he was a well-practiced angler; his prey fought for awhile before he exhausted it, but what he pulled out of the water didn't look particularly appetizing: a flat, ugly creature with gaping jaws, like a cross being a stingray and a miniature shark. David managed to free his hook without being bitten; he gave the weirdling—his name for it, which stuck—a close inspection before he pronounced it inedible and tossed it overboard. Yet the incident broke the ice; David's catch was the main subject of discussion when we went ashore for lunch, and by the time the day was done, we were all speaking to one another once more.

This set the pattern for the next eight days. We camped on the narrow shoreline running beneath the bluffs, being careful to set up our tents beyond the high-water mark. We'd get up early, break camp, and continue sailing down the channel, always making sure that we never lost sight of the Eastern Divide. We'd sail all day, then beach the canoes as the sun was beginning to go down and set up camp once more. A quick dinner, some small-talk around the fire, then off to bed.

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After a couple of days, I let Carlos back into my tent. He'd resigned himself to the fact that Kuniko was sleeping between him and me. Yet I remained cool toward him, and his relationship with Kuni never really thawed. We were simply sharing quarters, and that was all there was to it.

Near the end of the third day, after hauling aboard countless weirdlings, David finally landed something that resembled a wide-mouth bass. All it took was switching bait; the first time he tried using bread instead of meat, he landed a channelmouth: a big, fleshy fish. David cleaned and cooked it that evening; we all tried a little bit, and found that it was delicious. Which was just as well, for our supplies were beginning to run low; after that, both he and Chris always had their lines in the water, with Barry or Kuniko sometimes taking a turn, and after awhile I tried my hand at it as well. Hooking a channelmouth wasn't all that difficult; you had to cast your lure to the port side, into deep water away from the bluffs, and slowly reel it back in. The real trick was getting it out of the water before a weirdling homed in; now and then, someone would pull up a half-eaten channelmouth that a weirdling had devoured while it was on the line.

Getting fresh fish was a blessing in more ways than one; my craving for seafood was becoming almost obsessive. I still wasn't showing any obvious signs of pregnancy, yet I noticed that my breasts were becoming more full, a little more tender. And morning sickness had come back to haunt me; almost as soon as I got up, I'd have to make an excuse to quickly slip away and throw up everything in my stomach. Kuniko knew what was going on, so she'd cover for me; the guys just thought I was going to use the pit. Or at least Carlos and the Levin brothers were fooled; more than once, I noticed a curious look on Barry's face. Yet if he figured out what was going on, he kept it to himself.

By the morning of the sixth day, we could no longer see Midland; the far shore of the channel had disappeared beyond the horizon. Dense clouds were forming when we'd gone to bed the night before, and we awoke to a rippled grey sky. We put out to water, but the wind was harsh and the water was choppy. It wasn't long before a hard rain began to fall, and soon whitecaps began to appear. Chris and Carlos wanted to tough it out, but distant thunder settled the issue; we folded the sails and dropped the masts, then scurried back to shore just as the storm was beginning to hit.

As luck would have it, the place we found to ride out the weather was another gap in the Eastern Divide, similar to Shapiro Pass yet a little more broad, its bluffs less steep. When Carlos checked the map against his compass bearings, he discovered that it was the mouth of the Lee River, another inland stream. Although rapids surged through the gap, we discovered a place within the shelter of the bluffs where we could stay during the storm.

Once we beached the canoes and overturned them, we pitched our tents below the limestone escarpment and hunkered down for a long wait. The rain lashed at our tents and soaked everything we'd left outside, yet the storm blew itself out within a few hours. No one was in any hurry to leave; Carlos cocooned himself within his sleeping bag and took a long nap, and when I went over to the second tent to check on the others I discovered Chris doing the same while Barry and David played blackjack with crackers as their stakes. Maybe we needed a rain day. We'd been traveling for a full Coyote week: time to take a break.

We also needed fresh water, though, so Kuniko and I gathered a few empty flasks, pulled a couple of rifles across our shoulders, and set forth into the unnamed pass. After clambering across slippery rocks for an hour or so, we

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came upon a rugged trail that led up the side of the bluffs. Perhaps it had been formed by natural erosion, or maybe by creek cats; either way, it seemed easy to climb. With nothing better to do and several hours left before sundown, we decided to go exploring.

The trail was more difficult than it first appeared; we skinned our hands and knees on bare limestone, and halfway up we considered giving up and turning back. Yet there was an unspoken agreement that we wouldn't quit, and about an hour and a half later, we finally reached the end of the trail.

It was worth the effort, for we found ourselves on top of the Eastern Divide. Faux birch had managed to sink their roots into the rocky ground; far below us, the vast and wild marshlands of New Florida stretched away to the western horizon, an endless sea of grass threaded by narrow waterways, the Lee River meandering through the prairie like a blue serpent. The clouds were beginning to part, and golden shafts of late-afternoon sunlight fell upon the island; through the haze, an iridescent rainbow had formed above isolated stands of blackwood. A whole world seemed to have been painted just for us, so heart-achingly beautiful that all we could do was sit on a boulder and gaze upon it all, not daring to say a word lest it break the spell.

After a time, I turned to look the other way. Grey clouds hung heavy above the East Channel, casting bleak shadows upon its cold waters, yet now I saw something new: in the far distance to the south, a dark expanse that met the sky as a razor-thin line. The Great Equatorial River, still another two days away by boat.

"There it is." Kuniko's voice was quiet; she was gazing in the same direction. "That's what we've come all this way to find." She paused. "Think you're ready for it?"

It may or may not have been a rhetorical question, yet all the same I found myself more afraid than at any time before in my life. Nothing else came close: not the day my father said goodbye, not the first night I spent in Schaefly, not even my last moments on Earth before I boarded the shuttle to the *Alabama*. In that instant, the Equi was more forbidding than the forty-six light-years I had crossed to get to this place, for at least then I was asleep; had I perished in biostasis, my passage from life to death would have benn effortless and without pain. I couldn't say the same for the uncertain fate that lay before me.

"No," I whispered, "I'm not." I looked at Kuniko. "We . . . I mean, we don't have to do this, y'know."

"What are you saying?"

"I mean, we can get off here." Standing up, I desperately scanned the top of the escarpment until I spotted what appeared to be a downward slope. "Look," I said, my voice quavering as I pointed to it. "We go that way, down the other side." I gestured to the Lee River. "Then all we have to do is follow the river. I've seen the map . . . it leads north to the Alabama River, and that takes us to Boid Creek. Follow that for a while, and it meets the junction of North Creek. Once we're there, all we have to do is hike due east, and we're back in Liberty. . . ."

"Wendy . . ."

"Yeah, okay, I know, it's long . . . but I'm telling you, we can do it."

Even as I spoke, I realized how absurd the notion was. Two women, on their own, trekking through hundreds of miles of uncharted wilderness with nothing more than a couple of rifles and the clothes on their backs, a vague understanding of New Florida's river system as their only sense of direction.

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"Wendy . . ." Kuniko's voice was soft, as patient as if she was speaking to a child.

"Yeah, all right, that's stupid." Another thought occurred to me. "So we cut loose from the others. Grab one of the canoes, take as much stuff as we need, then paddle up the Lee River. It took us just eight days to get here, right? That means we can be back home in . . ."

"Wendy . . . we can't go upstream through rapids."

"We can try, can't we?"

"No."

"Oh, screw you!"

I don't remember exactly what happened next. I have only a fleeting recollection of trying to hit her; perhaps she managed to stop me, or perhaps she didn't. Yet when I came to my senses once more, I was curled up in her arms, sobbing and shaking as she gently stroked my hair and told me that everything would be okay, everything would be all right, we'd get through this somehow.

It took awhile, but eventually I calmed down. Kuniko wiped away the tears and kissed me on the cheek, then she helped me to my feet. One last look behind us, and we began making our way back down the path.

We had to hurry. Daylight was fading fast, and night was closing in.

It was just as well that we took some time off, for two days later, we entered the Great Equatorial River. The southernmost edge of New Florida ended in a short peninsula where the Eastern Divide gradually sloped down into the warm waters south of the equator. We sailed past the point with our fists raised in victory, yelling at the top of our lungs as the wind carried us out of the East Channel. Carlos pulled out the map and marked it with pen, unofficially naming the confluence the Montero Delta. He'd later claim that he christened it in honor of his parents, but those of us who were with him at the time knew better.

The Great Equatorial is a river in name only. In fact, it's an elongated ocean that completely circles Coyote, fed by the dozens of channels, rivers, and creeks that empty into it from either side of the equator. At it broadest point, the Equi is nearly eleven hundred miles across. Between New Florida and the southern hemisphere, the distance is relatively narrow: four hundred and ten miles.

Just as Carlos predicted, the wind patterns changed once we were past the equator. Now they came from the east, taking us west along the long, shallow bay that marked the southern shore of New Florida. In order to keep those easterlies at our backs, we'd have to remain below the equator as long as possible, and that meant traveling farther away from land; if we tried to hug the shore, we'd eventually be forced to drop our sails and paddle the entire distance, fighting both wind and current. Since the mouth of the West Channel lay nearly six hundred miles away, no one wanted to do that, so it was with no little reluctance that we set forth to sail up the middle of the Equi.

We maneuvered the canoes next to each other and lashed them together to form a twin-hulled catamaran; as one craft, we were now heavier, but we also had twice as much square-footage of sail. We took inventory of our supplies; provided that we didn't brush our teeth and ate sparingly, we figured we'd have enough food and potable water to get us through the nine days we thought it would take us to reach the West Channel. We could always fish, though, and if necessary we could make landfall and locate a source of fresh

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water. Otherwise we'd stay in the river, sleeping in shifts during the night so that there would always be someone awake to mind the rudder. It wouldn't be easy, but we'd get by somehow.

At least, that was the theory. But Carlos and Chris had made their plans in the comfort of the boat house, where a hot meal and a comfortable bed were only a few steps away. I don't think either of them realized just what it takes to travel by canoe for four hundred miles without setting foot on dry land.

As we sailed away from New Florida, I sat with my back to the mast and watched the shoreline as it gradually disappeared below the horizon. A flock of swoops followed us out in the water, taunting us with their raucous cries as they circled the canoes, but eventually they turned and soared back toward land. At that moment, I would have gladly traded my soul to be able to go with them.

Instead, I hugged my knees between my arms, and tried not to look at Carlos as he pulled at the rudder cables. His shirt half-unbuttoned, the breeze casting his hair cast back from his sun-browned shoulders, he projected a heroic image; I could tell that he knew it, too. A couple of weeks ago, I might have melted at the sight; now, I could only feel contempt for this boy pretending to be a man.

Although the canoes were made more stable by being lashed together, they rocked constantly upon surf; everyone was sea-sick at least once. The days were hot, the nights brutally cold after the sun went down, yet there was no shelter save for the elusive shade cast by the sails, no warmth except for our blankets. We had enough room to stretch out and sleep, but there was little privacy; it was as if six people were sharing a narrow room with no dividing walls. I'd rather not describe how we relieved ourselves, save that it was messy, uncomfortable, and embarrassing.

David and Chris fished almost constantly, but nothing took their bait . . . save for once, on the third day out, when Chris caught something, only to have his twenty-pound line snapped as easily as if it were floss. A few moments later, a great shadow passed beneath the boats; an enormously large fin briefly broke the surface about a hundred yards from the boats, then disappeared. Once more, we were reminded that we were visitors in an unknown world; there were things out here that had never known the human presence, and some of them were potentially lethal.

On the morning of the fourth day, we awoke to see a dense wall of clouds forming on the western horizon. We covered the cargo with tarps and lashed them down, then furled the sails and took down the masts. The storm broke a few hours later, and we soon found ourselves fighting ten-foot breakers that threatened to swamp our craft at any moment. It was like fighting the rapids in Shapiro Pass all over again, only now much worse, for this time we didn't have the option of making for shore. The storm didn't end until long after dark; we slept little that night, and the following day we were cold, wet, and sore, with three inches of water in the bottom of the boats, which we had to bail out with drinking cups.

Noticing that the winds were now coming from the west, Chris accused Carlos of misreading the compass and taking us off-course, yet Carlos refused to show him the map and his handwritten readings until Kuniko intervened. As it turned out, Chris was right, although it wasn't Carlos's fault; the storm had blown us ten miles over the equatorial line. Nonetheless, it meant that we had to fold the sails once more and paddle back in the opposite direction, a chore that cost us a day in travel time. Chris and Carlos

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glowered at each other from the sterns of their canoes as they rowed, and spoke little to one another.

Morale had been fragile even before the storm; now it sank to a dangerous new low. Kuniko snapped at Barry when he pulled out his guitar when she thought he should be standing watch. David lapsed into a funk; he sat for hours in the middeck of the *Pleiades,* his head lowered and his arms folded across his stomach, saying nothing as he stared at the water. Unable to agree on even the most minor details, Chris and Carlos bickered constantly, and it was left to Kuniko to settle their arguments. As the oldest person aboard, she had become the arbiter of disputes; now she was a surrogate mother to everyone, scolding us when we were bad, forever trying to keep us in line. I was used to this, but it grated upon the boys.

Our worst problem was the diminishing supplies of food and water. By the seventh day out, we were forced to dig into the emergency rations, and even then only carefully: a few crackers and some dried fruit for breakfast, then nothing else until the end of the day. We took water in small sips, never able to fill our cups at any time.

I was always ravenous. Kuniko, mindful of the fact that I was carrying, slipped me food when the guys weren't looking, and let me have a drink when I needed it. Yet the cramps and the bouts of morning sickness had returned. Before we left New Florida, I had been able to sneak away from camp when I needed to throw up. Now that this was impossible, I tried to pass it off as sea-sickness. I was also beginning to show. Not very much, yet it was clear that my midriff was a little larger than it had been before we left Liberty. It was only a matter of time before someone noticed.

Since our luck had been bad already, it only figured it'd have to be Carlos.

"Is it just me, or are you getting fat?"

He said this on the morning of our eighth day on the river, as I was changing my shirt. I'd long since given up any efforts at modesty, yet even David had stopped staring at me and Kuniko when we undressed. In fact, it had been several days since he'd shown interest in anything at all.

"Just a little." I forced a smile. None of our clothes were clean; some were just a little less filthy than others. "Must be our rich diet."

It was meant to be a joke, but it didn't come off that way. Chris was lying across the stern of the *Pleiades,* a sunburned arm cast across his face to block out the sun; hearing what I'd just said, he looked up. "Rich diet of what? You been holding out on us?"

"I'm kidding." I tried to hide my face by ducking my head a little to tie the halter behind my neck. "It's just a girl thing."

Carlos looked away, but Chris wasn't letting it go. "No, I'm serious," he said as he propped himself up on his elbows. "I thought we made some rules about hoarding."

"I'm not. . . ."

"Then how come you're gaining so much *weight?*" Chris raised a hand to shade his eyes. "You must be eating more than we are, because you puke it all up every morning!"

"Drop it." Kuniko was stretched out along the *Pleiades*, her head propped against the mast. She turned to glare at Chris. "If she's eating more, it's because I've been giving her some of my share. And if she's sea-sick, then that's her business, not yours."

That should have settled the issue. The boys had learned to pay attention

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when she put her foot down. But while Chris fell quiet, I could feel Carlos's gaze even after I had turned my back to him. "There's no way you could be getting fat," he said after a moment. "We haven't eaten enough for anyone to gain weight."

"I told you, it's a girl thing."

That sounded lame even as I said it. "Wendy," he said quietly, "is there something we should know about?"

Chris looked up again, and Barry glanced up from his guitar; only David didn't seem to be paying any attention. Kuniko slowly let out her breath.

"Go ahead, tell him," she said. "There's no point in keeping it a secret any longer."

The last thing I wanted to do was reveal the truth of my condition, yet there was no way around it. But when I turned to Carlos, I saw that his jaw had gone slack. I stared into his eyes and said nothing; no words were necessary.

"Oh, my God," he whispered, and I nodded. "Jesus, when . . . I mean, how long have you known. . . ?"

"Before we left. I wanted to tell you, but . . ." Suddenly ashamed, I dropped my eyes. "I was afraid you'd . . ."

"Oh, man! Oh, hell . . ." He stared at me, shaking his head. "If I'd known . . . if you'd *told* us . . ."

"You would have done *what?*" I asked. "Left me behind? Maybe taken off a little sooner?"

He didn't seem to hear. "You shouldn't have done that," he muttered, as much to himself as to me. "I mean, we shouldn't have brought you along. You should have stayed behind . . ."

"He's right, Wendy." Chris's voice was low. "If you're going to have a baby, you should have told us before we agreed to take you along. This is no place for . . ."

"And what if I didn't *want* to have a baby?" I looked up at him again; my face grew warm as my temper began to rise. "Maybe I just wanted to get away, think things over awhile. That's my right, isn't it?"

"Your *right?*" Now there was anger in Carlos's eyes. "Hey, wait a minute! It's my child, too, y'know! Don't I have a say in. . . ?"

"You self-centered jerk! What makes you think it's *yours?*"

To this day, I don't know what made me say that. Perhaps it was the way he had treated me ever since we left Liberty. And now, after all this, he wanted to claim the privilege of telling me what I should do with my life.

He gaped at me as if I had just slugged him. "How. . . ? You couldn't have."

"Wendy, please." Kuniko said, very softly. "Don't do this. . . ."

"I couldn't?" I wasn't paying attention to her; Carlos was my sole focus. "Tell me something . . . do you really think you bagged a virgin that night?"

Confusion . . . then dawning comprehension. Carlos stared past me, his eyes moving across the two boats. Barry sat quietly in the bow, stolidly returning his gaze. No, there had never been anything between him and me save for friendship of the most platonic kind. David was much too young, and he and I had never really gotten along very well anyway. But Chris . . .

"Sorry, man." His shoulders slumped forward, Chris was barely able to look at his lifelong friend. "I never meant for you to find out."

Carlos's eyes narrowed. His right hand fell to his side; I could see that he was reaching for his paddle. "You son of . . ."

"Hey, guys . . . I think you should see something."

This was the first thing David had said in several days; perhaps that's why we all turned to look at him. As before, his gaze was fixed upon the riv-

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er, yet now he had raised his hand to point at something off the starboard side of the *Pleiades*.

For a instant, I thought—indeed hoped—he might have spotted land. Perhaps the coast of New Florida, even though that was an impossibility; we were at least thirty miles from shore. Yet there was nothing on the horizon.

"I don't . . ." Barry shaded his eyes. "No, wait a sec . . ."

About a hundred yards away, a dark shape moved just beneath the sun-dappled water. A long fin briefly appeared, vanished a second later, leaving a long trough in its wake.

The argument was suddenly forgotten. "Maybe we should . . ." Kuniko began, and in that instant the leviathan hurtled upward from the depths.

Like a dark grey missile breaching the surface, it pitched itself high into the air, water streaming off its dark grey flesh. At least sixty feet long, it had a sleek, bullet-shaped head and a crenellated dorsal fin running down its back. I caught a brief glimpse of whisker-like tendrils on either side of a gaping mouth, then it crashed back into the river and disappeared.

"That . . . that's a catfish." Stunned, Chris could barely speak.

"No catfish is that big." Barry's voice was soft. "That was a whale. . . ."

"Catwhale." David was grinning. "Big ass catwhale!"

Whatever it was, it had changed direction. An elongated shadow turned toward us, and for an instant its fin sliced above the water.

"I think it's seen us," I said. "Maybe we'd better . . ."

"*Yee-haah!*" David howled. "Let's go fishing!"

Hearing the loud *poppa-poppa-poppa* of a rifle on full auto, I looked around, saw him standing up in the *Pleiades,* a gun cradled in his hands. He hadn't raised it to his shoulder, so his aim was off; spent cartridges clattered across the middeck as bullets pocked the water just above the shadow.

"Dinnertime!" he yelled. "Come and get it. . . !"

"David, *no!* Stop!" Kuniko was closest to him, she lunged forward, trying to get the rifle away from him.

David twisted away from her, but tripped on a rucksack and fell across the canoe. His finger was still within the trigger-guard; the gun went off again. The next shots went wild, missing Kuni by only a few inches; she ducked, instinctively throwing her arms over her head. David ignored her; fumbling with the rifle, he rolled over on his side, aimed at the water again . . .

"Stop!" Chris was on his feet, trying to get to his brother, but the mast was in the way. "Put it down. . . !"

Thinking Kuniko had been hit, I scrambled on hands and knees across the *Orion*. I was on the sailboard when she glanced in my direction. No blood on her face or hands. . . .

"Look out!" Carlos yelled.

I looked around just in time to see the monster come up again . . . this time, less than a dozen feet away.

A wall of mottled grey flesh rose up next to the boats, bigger than anything I'd ever seen. For a split-second, the catwhale seemed to stand on its tail, as if challenging gravity itself. To this day, I have the vivid recollection of seeing it posed against the sky. . . .

Then it came down upon us, smashing straight into the *Pleiades*.

I remember very little of what happened next.

One moment, I was kneeling on *Orion*'s sailboard, watching the catwhale as it hurtled into the other boat. A fleeting impression of being airborne, then of something hitting me in the back, shocking me out of my senses.

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The next thing I knew, I was underwater, helplessly thrashing against the undertow which threatened to drag me further down. Bubbles rose from my nose and mouth: my life escaping from my lungs, traveling upward to a rippling silver-blue ceiling somewhere far above my head.

Salt stung my eyes; my vision began to form a tunnel. It would be so easy to give up now. All I had to do was just let *go*, allow myself to sink into cool, dark oblivion.

Yet I wasn't ready to die. Somehow, I knew that I had to survive, even if only for a few more seconds. I closed my mouth, holding what little air was left in my lungs, and began flailing my arms and legs, propelling myself upward. Stroke, kick, stroke, kick, just the way I'd been taught. . . .

The surface was just within reach when a shadow fell upon me: something from below, coming up fast. I looked down, caught a glimpse of an enormous, rubbery mouth surrounded by tendrils, and two black eyes the size of dinner plates.

The mouth yawned open beneath my feet, and I saw the pink ribbing within its throat. It could easily swallow me whole. . . .

A silent scream rose deep within my chest. I kicked back, as hard as I could, and the sole of my left foot connected solidly with the creature's head.

Maybe it was startled by prey that actually fought back, or perhaps it decided that I just wasn't worth the effort. Either way, it gave me a pass. The mouth closed, and the catwhale darted away.

My lungs burning, my skull feeling as if it was about burst open, I fought my way to the surface. My head broke water and I gasped for breath.

I don't recall whether or not I cried out for help. I think I did, but I can't be sure. The only distinct memory I have of the next few moments is someone grabbing me under the shoulders, hauling me roughly out of the water and across a gunnel.

"Easy, easy," murmured Kuniko. "You'll be okay. . . ."

"David!" Chris yelled from somewhere nearby.

Gagging on saltwater, I turned sideways and threw up across someone's legs. A hand brushed the hair from my eyes; a soft voice told me everything would be okay. Thinking it was Kuniko, I looked up at the person who had rescued me.

"David! Where the hell is David?"

Darkness overtook me, and I passed out in Carlos's arms.

I awoke to the gentle rocking motion of a boat slowly moving across water, a quiet breeze snapping at an unfurled sail. The light was mellow, subdued; the setting sun gilded a thin skein of clouds above the western horizon. Everything was silent, eerily serene.

Weak, every muscle aching, I propped myself up on my elbows. I was lying across a wet tarp, a moist blanket pulled up around my body. My head had been resting in someone's lap; looking around, I saw Carlos sitting cross-legged behind me, his back braced against the mast, his head lolling against his chest as he dozed. A few feet away, Kuniko sat in the stern, her hands gripping the rudder cables. She hadn't noticed that I was awake; her eyes were fixed upon the horizon, squinting against the sun as she piloted the canoe. The fact that she and I were in the same boat with Carlos was my first clue that something was wrong.

The *Pleiades* was missing; a severed nylon rope drifting in the water along the starboard side was the only indication that it had once been tied

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to the *Orion*. The waterline was only a couple of inches below the gunnel; the surviving canoe was overloaded, almost on the verge of sinking under its own weight. Peering past Carlos, I saw Chris sitting on the forward deck. His right arm was wrapped in a torn shirt and suspended by a sling around his neck; like Kuniko, he was watching the horizon, as if searching for something. Barry sat in the prow, his back turned to everyone; an oar lay across his lap, but I noticed that a rifle lay only a few inches away.

"Hey . . . you all right?" Carlos's hand was tender as he touched my arm.

"Yeah. Think so." As I spoke, Kuniko looked at me. Her eyes were moist and red-rimmed. For a moment I thought she was going to say something, but she remained quiet. "What. . . ? I mean, I don't . . ."

"Don't you remember? That fish . . ."

"Catwhale." I had only a vague recollection, but most of it was confused; a jumble of disjointed images. "That's what David called it. . . ." Suddenly, I realized what was wrong. "Where's David?"

"He's gone." Kuniko's voice was low, almost a whisper. "He went overboard when you did. You came up again . . . he didn't."

Flashback: an enormous mouth yawning open beneath me, the panic-stricken kick that chased it away. I looked around at Chris again. He still hadn't moved; there was no indication whether he'd heard us. Perhaps it was just as well that I couldn't see his face.

"*Pleiades* sank." Carlos shifted his legs a little, then he carefully laid my head back in his lap. "The thing . . . catwhale, if you want to call it that . . . broke it in half. Chris and Kuniko got off in time, and we managed to cut it loose before it dragged down *Orion*."

"The last thing I . . ." A memory of fighting the undertow, swimming for my life as the air boiled out of my lungs. I had an impulse to tell the others of my narrow escape, but now wasn't the time. "Chris, what happened to your arm?"

Chris didn't reply. "Broke it when the mast came down on him," Carlos said quietly. Chris muttered something I didn't catch, yet Carlos apparently did; he turned his head away.

"We thought we'd lost you," Kuniko said. "We couldn't find you for a couple of minutes. Then you came out of the water, and . . ." She let out her breath, and now there were tears in her eyes. "Thank God!"

Perhaps I should have thanked God, too. Just then, though, I was more appreciative to my late father, who'd taught me how to swim when I was still a toddler. He may have been a lousy dad, but on that one point he'd done pretty well by his daughter. "Yeah, okay . . . so where are we?"

"Halfway to shore. At least that's what we think . . . we've lost the compass, along with everything else that was on the *Pleiades*. Maybe another ten, fifteen miles to go."

"We've lost. . . ?"

"Shh. Take it easy." Kuniko returned her attention to the rudder. "Don't worry. We'll be home soon enough."

She was only half-right. We made it to shore about a couple of hours after sundown . . . but we were still a long way from home.

Although we still had the map, without a compass to give us an accurate bearing, we had no real idea of where we were. Somewhere west of the Alabama River, yet still many miles from the mouth of the West Channel, or at least that was our best guess. The shallow coastline lay ghostly white beneath the light of Bear as Kuniko and Barry paddled the last few hundred

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yards to shore; when they heard the soft crunch of sand beneath the keel, Carlos and Barry stepped off into the cold surf breaking against the beach and hauled the canoe ashore.

It felt strange to set up camp again, and not only because it was the first time we'd walked on dry land in eight days. Half of our supplies had been aboard the *Pleiades,* including one of the tents and most of what little food we had left; we pitched the remaining tent, then tied one of the tarps from the low bough of a short, palmetto-like tree as a sort of lean-to shelter. Yet it took awhile for anyone to remember to gather wood for a fire; that had always been David's job, and somehow I think we were all expecting him to emerge from the darkness, his arms laden with kindling, complaining about having to always do this himself.

Once a fire was started, though, no one wanted to gather around it. It wasn't just the fact that we were exhausted or that we had precious little to eat; we just couldn't bear to look at each other any more. Barry was filthy and unshaven, and for the first time he'd become irritable, unable to communicate except in short, terse monosyllables. Chris's eyes were unfocused, and he refused to speak to anyone. Kuniko's hair was matted, her shoulders slumped as if she'd been carrying our collective weight for thousands of miles. Carlos's face was haunted.

Lost, hungry, and sick to the bottom of our souls, we went to bed almost as soon as the fire was going and the tent was erect. There was no room in the tent for all five of us, and so I offered my place in the tent to Chris, telling him that I'd sleep in the tarp tonight with Barry. He stared at Carlos, and for a moment I thought he'd refuse, but then Carlos dully announced that he'd take first watch; without high bluffs to protect us from any boids who might happen to spot our fire, someone had to stay awake. Barry volunteered for second watch and so Chris crawled into the tent with Kuniko while Barry and I spread out my bedroll under the tarp and huddled together beneath its blanket. The last thing I saw was Carlos silhouetted against the fire, squatting on a crooked piece of driftwood with the remaining rifle at his side.

I didn't sleep well, if at all. Whenever I shut my eyes, I saw the catwhale rising above us in that moment before it crashed down upon the *Pleiades*. I'd wake up to stare at the canvas tarp rippling in the wind. At one point, I found myself crying, trying to hold back my sobs lest I awaken Barry. Then I closed my eyes again, try to force myself to sleep.

Sometime very early in the morning, I awoke to an unfamiliar sound. For a moment, I thought I heard static. An indistinct voice, as if coming from far away. A quiet murmur, much closer. Then silence, save for the soft hiss of morning tide against sand.

I raised my head from beneath the blanket. The sun wasn't up yet, but neither was the night as dark as it had been. Although the stars were still out, a cool blue tint outlined the eastern horizon. Barry still lay cuddled next to me, snoring quietly with his fists wadded together against his face; apparently Carlos hadn't awakened him to take over the night watch.

I sat up, rubbed my eyes. Thin brown smoke wafted up from the fire, now burning low, yet Carlos wasn't to be seen.

It was warm beneath the tarp. So tempting just to fall back asleep, wait until the sun came up or someone else stirred. Yet the sound I'd heard puzzled me, and Carlos's absence was disturbing, so I carefully pushed aside the blanket and crawled out from under the tarp.

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Carlos was down by the *Orion*; he had pulled out the rest of the gear we'd left in the canoe, and it now lay across the dry sand, arranged in some sort of order. When I came upon him he was kneeling next to the boat, closely inspecting its inner frame by the glow of a flashlight resting on the bow deck.

"Hey," I said. "What are you doing?"

Startled, he turned to look up at me. "Nothing," he said, almost a whisper. "Everything's all right. Go on back to bed."

The rifle lay against Carlos's pack, along with a bedroll, a food container, and two water flasks. Glancing into the open pack, I noticed the medkit tucked inside. All these things had been scattered around the camp site when we had gone to sleep; now they were gathered together, as if Carlos were preparing to load them aboard the canoe.

But that wasn't all. On the bow seat was an item of equipment I hadn't seen before: a satphone, its antenna unfolded. Identical to the one which he'd thrown into Sand Creek two weeks ago.

I bent down to pick it up. "Carlos, where did you. . . ?"

Carlos snatched away the satphone before I could touch it. Then, realizing that trying to hide it now was pointless, he reluctantly put it back. "It was in my pack," he murmured. "I found a spare unit in the armory when I stole the guns, so I took it as well. Just in case we ran into something we couldn't handle." A grim smile. "Guess that's now."

"Why didn't you. . . ?" Confused, I shook my head. "I mean, I can't believe you didn't tell anyone."

"Really?" Carlos wiped the sand off his hands as he stood up. "You yourself told me what a self-centered jerk I am. This just proves it." He took the satphone from the seat, folded the antenna. "I didn't let anyone know I was carrying this because I didn't want them crying for help at the first sign of trouble. That's why I got rid of Kuniko's. I knew things would get tough, but I had to see if I could handle it . . . if we could handle it . . . on our own."

Looking down, he slowly let out his breath. "I never expected *this*. If I'd known you were pregnant, if I thought anyone would be harmed . . . I would have made the call earlier. Or maybe I'd have just gone out by myself, left the rest of you . . ."

"You've called home?"

He nodded. "Waited up until I saw the *Alabama* pass over. That was about ten minutes ago." He glanced up; the ship would have been a bright star, traveling east across the night sky, easily seen from the ground. "Woke up Mike Geissal and told him where we are, or at least my best guess. And I told him where we'd hidden the shuttle hardware. A couple of motherboards from the guidance systems . . . they're in the false bottom of a paint can in the boat house. Once they find 'em and put them back in place, no one should have any trouble flying out here. Two or three hours, tops, and you guys can expect a rescue."

I closed my eyes, felt myself go weak. A few hours from now, either the *Mayflower* or the *Plymouth* would descend from the sky. Before the day was over, we'd be back in Liberty. Fresh food and water, clean clothes and a bath, a bed surrounded by four walls and a roof. . . . I'd never realized how much I missed such simple luxuries.

Hearing him move away, I looked back at him again. Carlos had picked up the food container and was hauling it over to the *Orion*. He placed it in the canoe, then turned to reach for his pack. "What are you. . . ?"

"What I should have done in the first place." He stashed the satphone

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next to the medkit within the pack, then closed its flap and cinched it tight. "Like I said, it was stupid of me to risk your life or anyone else's. Should have known better. So I'm finishing this by myself . . ."

"Carlos. . . !"

"Shh." He gently placed a finger against my lips. "Don't wake the others." I nodded reluctantly, and he took his hand from my mouth. "I've got to do this, Wendy. If I don't, then everything we've been through . . . even David getting killed . . . will have been pointless."

"It's not pointless!" I snapped, louder than I intended. "David's death was an accident! You can't let yourself feel guilty for. . . !"

"Maybe I am. Maybe I'm not." He sighed, then he turned away to grab his bedroll. "I do know that I've lost my best friend over this." He glanced toward the tent where Chris lay asleep, then back at me again. "And I've lost you, too."

I opened my mouth, intending to deny this . . . and then realized that anything I'd say would be a lie, and thus would hurt him even more. Perhaps I'd been in love with him when I decided to run away from Liberty, but that was over now; I'd seen the darker half of his soul, and it would take a long while for me to forgive him for all the things he'd said and done.

"I'll be gone awhile, but I'm keeping the satphone." He smiled again. "Won't throw it away this time, I promise. When the baby comes, I want you to call me. . . ."

"You'll be back by then."

The smile faded. Carlos glanced away, toward the east. "I might. But I've got a lot of things to work out first. And there's a big planet out there . . . someone's got to scout the terrain. It's either this or stay home and feed the chickens."

"Where are you going? Up West Channel?"

"Uh-uh." He shook his head as he tossed the bedroll into the boat. "I'd just wind up back in Liberty if I went that way. I think . . ."

He shrugged, then picked up the rifle and placed it next to the rest of his gear. Perhaps he didn't want to tell me, or perhaps he didn't really know himself. With the exception of the tent, he had taken everything he needed to survive.

"I better get out of here before the others wake up." He reached down, picked up an oar, idly weighed it in his hands. "Listen . . . take care of Marie, will you? I haven't been much of a big brother lately, and she's going to need someone to look after her."

Dawn was beginning to break; the wind was starting to rise. Feeling a chill, I wrapped my arms around my shoulders. "Sure, okay. Carlos . . ."

I hesitated, not knowing what to say. He waited, then nodded. "That's all right. I know." He stepped close, put an arm around me and bent to give me a long kiss which tasted of salt water and wilderness.

"I love you," he whispered.

I nodded, but couldn't say what he wanted me to say. "Good luck," I said, very softly. "I'll . . . we'll be waiting for you."

There was nothing else that needed to be said. Carlos turned away, placed the oar in the back of the canoe, then pushed it out into the surf. He climbed into the boat, settled into the stern, dug his paddle into the water. A few long strokes and he was away, the ebbing tide quickly carrying him away from the shore.

I sat on the beach, letting the river lick at my bare feet, as I watched him

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raise sail. The wind was coming from the west this morning; it caught the canvas sheet and pushed it outward, and soon the *Orion* was a small triangular spot on the horizon.

I couldn't tell whether he ever looked back, but I waved anyway. Once he was gone, I stood up and went to wake the others.

That was many years ago.

So many years, in fact, that it's often hard for me to recognize the girl I once was. I know she's hiding somewhere within the woman I've become, for every now and then I've let her out, yet each time I do, she seems to have receded a little farther into the past. Perhaps this is why I've put all this to paper; I'm not proud of some of the things I did, and all too often I've deliberately mistold the story so that I don't have to confront those terrible memories. But now it's almost done, and when I'm through, I hope I can get on with the rest of my life.

Shortly before noon, the *Plymouth* arrived to pick us up. As it turned out, we'd traveled a little farther than we believed; the beach upon which we were shipwrecked was only thirty miles from the confluence of the West Channel. If we hadn't lost the *Pleiades,* in another day or so we would have been able to start making our way up the channel; another week, and perhaps we might have returned home on our own. Or perhaps not. In hindsight, I think we were lucky to have made it as far as we did.

On the way back to Liberty, we spotted the *Orion*. Carlos was sailing down the West Equatorial, heading west along the southern shore of New Florida. Jud Tinsley was piloting the shuttle, and he brought it down low, at one point hovering almost a hundred feet above the canoe. Yet he couldn't make a water-landing, and when Jud attempted to contact Carlos by radio, he refused to respond; he simply stared straight ahead, ignoring the shuttle even as he battled the downdraft caused by its vertical thrusters. Jud finally got the message; he lifted away from the river, leaving Carlos alone.

That was the last I saw of Carlos Montero for a very long time. When we finally met again, we'd both changed. But that's a different story, and one which doesn't need to be told now.

Three Coyote months later—Adnachiel 11, c.y. 02—I brought my baby into the world: Susan Kuniko Gunther, named after her late grandmother and the doctor who delivered her. As the first child born on the new world, my daughter's birthday was considered an historic event. A couple of Council members had demanded that I obey the moratorium on new births, but Kuniko had refused to perform an abortion, and so there was little anyone could do about it. Besides, it wasn't long before Susan had plenty of playmates; apparently I wasn't the only lady in Liberty who had been concealing her incipient motherhood.

Shortly before Susan was born, Chris proposed marriage. I turned him down. Maybe he was Susan's father, or maybe he wasn't; it really didn't matter, because I was having a hard enough time being a teenage mother, and I didn't want to be a teenage bride as well. And I couldn't wed someone who hated Carlos as much as he did. Which was just as well, for eventually we all saw each other again . . . but, again, that's another story.

Coyote was a different place then, just as I was a different person. We make stupid mistakes when we're young; we do our best to make amends for them as we get older. We survive by learning; by learning, we survive.

Such is life. So be it. ❍

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ARBITRARY NIGHT IN THE UNIVERSITY LAB

The fluorescents are dimmed
in their overhead fixtures.
The light that they cast is a shade.

In the straw of their cages
the white mice are sleeping.
Like children six to a bed.

Three cats are awake
with their nocturnal natures.
No motion for their eyes to stalk.

The two-headed dog is dreaming
(1) of sunlight and Frisbees,
(2) of snocones and frolics in hay.

Hard to believe
that in less than an hour
fluorescents will flicker to bright.

Day will come crashing.
Electrodes attaching.
Terror that is very refined.

—Bruce Boston

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ON BOOKS

Paul Di Filippo

hey Do Things Different There

Let's conduct a small tour into the world of haute fantasy, or slipstream land. Here, novels employing undeniable genre tropes re marketed as anything but, and uthors sometimes exhibit strange ehaviors and quirks not normally ound among our own citizens.

David Searcy's debut novel, *Ordinary Horror* (Viking, hardcover, 24.95, 230 pages, ISBN 0-670-9476-1) might have been written y Kathe Koja or Robert Aickman or ven James Blaylock at his spookist—save for its extreme stance of efusing ever to grapple face-to-face ith its nebulous terrors. Very wellritten on a sentence-by-sentence evel, this book nonetheless swims a kind of formless soup of angst nd anomie and dread. I understand utterly and truly sympathize ith Searcy's quest to steer clear of ne ridiculous end of the horror literature spectrum where insane lowns wield chainsaws in Indian urial grounds, and I admire the ay he amasses a novel's worth of lot without anything decisive ever ctually happening until (maybe) at ne climax. But this is one case here less might indeed be less.

Searcy opens with a great droll ne: "Here's a horror story for you." [e then introduces us to his immaclately limned protagonist, Frank elabano, a seventy-year-old widwer whose rose garden is under atack by moles or gophers. Seeing an d for an exotic plant which will erve as an organic animal-repelnt, Delabano sends away for a quartet of sprouts. When they ar rive, he beds them in his garden The plants immediately flourish, ex hibiting many odd qualities (smells pollen, perhaps even ambulation a night) and eventually they bloom ir uncanny forms. Delabano goes to a library to consult some reference works, and finds a curious volume which relates, second hand, the Amazonian journeys of one Dr Eberhard, who seems to be the dis coverer of this very plant. (Chapte Eight of *Ordinary Horror*, the only one to deviate from Delabano's POV is a long extract from Eberhard's apocryphal *The Golden Path*.)

Meanwhile, Delabano's neighbors Mike and Carol Getz, begin to insin uate themselves cheerfully into hi lonely life. Their youngest daughte Janie, appears to have some mysti cal connection to the plants and t other spooky phenomena in th neighborhood (missing dogs, enig matic garbagemen, scrambled cabl channels from no known source) She and Delabano tentatively poo their mental resources, but come t no firm plans. Finally, at a Hal loween barbecue, Mike Getz deliver a semicoherent thesis about th plants, before a veritable holocaus —either imagined or actual—over takes the whole neighborhood.

Summarized thus, the bool sounds like a conflation of Ra Bradbury, Henry Kuttner, and H. P Lovecraft. But nothing could be fur ther from the truth. The leisurely diffuse catalog of emotions and dai ly minutia, weathers and land scapes, which Searcy indulges in makes Haruki Murakami look lik

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Edgar Rice Burroughs. The pace and effect of his writing is akin to Brian Aldiss's experiment with the French antinovel, *A Report on Probability A* (1968). Consider this passage, wherein Delabano meditates on couch ruffles: "A little curtain at the base of the couch as if there were something under it requiring formal containment. An official sort of darkness, a precinct of shadows beneath the couch. He gets down on his knees. He can put his hand right under it of course; right through the ruffles, the little pleated curtain that looks as if something were intended to emerge theatrically from behind it. Dust ruffles is what his wife called them. To keep dust from escaping into the room perhaps."

And so on, anent ruffles, for another half page or so.

Chapter by chapter, I mildly enjoyed riding Delabano's shoulders. But this is Jamesian (both M. R. and Henry) fiction carried beyond the pale. When the Old Man of the Rose Garden finally set me down, I found we hadn't taken a step from our starting point.

Two Titans bestride modern fantasy, and in a superficial but real sense they are antithetical. The first and foremost, of course, is Tolkien. His heirs, needless to say, are legion, filling the bestseller lists. The other paramount fantasy genius of our age is Mervyn Peake. Those who aspire to model their fiction on his books are less numerous, less applauded, and less pleasing, apparently, to the popular taste. (Although the recent success of China Miéville's *Perdido Street Station* (2000), a novel that brilliantly updates Peake's riffs, is encouragement aplenty.)

Peake's obsessive interiorization, his concentration on the shadowy corners of both edifice and intellect, his gleeful mordancy—all these traits stand in contrast to Tolkien's bluff and hearty extroversion. The sod of Middle Earth versus the cobbles of Gormenghast: the battle eternal is fought down to our own day.

The newest shot from a brave soldier in Peake's army is *Observatory Mansions* (Crown, hardcover, $23.00, 356 pages, ISBN 0-609-60680-8), by first-novelist Edward Carey (a denizen of the UK, by the way, residency in which country seems almost a prerequisite for doing this kind of novel right). Carey blends flavors of Peake, Patrick McGrath, Ian McEwan, and Shirley Jackson into a wonderfully rich slumgullion.

Like his mentor's books, Carey's novel features no outright supernatural events. Yet so strange are its characters and their behaviors and the eponymous setting that the novel is lifted almost entirely out of consensus reality.

The crumbling Observatory Mansions—once home to a single family, the Ormes, and at that time called Tearsham Park—lies in the middle of a normal, unnamed city, most likely London, but perhaps Manchester or Liverpool, for all that matters. The building was subdivided and rented out when the Ormes fell on hard times, and flourished for a while. But now only a handful of tenants occupy the decaying structure. There's the Dog Woman, a half-mad canine-ophile; Claire Higg, mesmerized by her television; the basement-dwelling porter named Porter, who maintains whatever livability exists; Peter Bugg, ex-schoolteacher with a ruler fixation; Mr. and Mrs. Orme, the husband catatonic, the wife confined to her bed; and finally, the central figure, thirty-seven-year-old Francis Orme, our highly unreliable and bizarrely idiomatic narrator.

Francis is a bundle of tics, hatreds, perverse loves, and ill will,

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wrapped up in a wounded intelligence. He wears white gloves 24/7, fearful of contamination (a fear whose roots we finally uncover three-quarters of the way through the book). He works in a wax museum as a mock statue. He maintains in the basement of Observatory Mansions a mysterious collection of nearly one thousand trivial objects, all stolen, including his prize, an enigmatic item referred to only as *The Object*. But whatever Francis's problems, he is self-sustaining. He has reached an accommodation with life. That is, until a new lodger arrives, a young woman named Anna Tap. Anna is slowly going blind, and has come to the Mansions to be close to a church devoted to Saint Lucy, the patron saint of eye problems.

A lady quite pitiable and laudable, one would imagine. But not to Francis. The introduction of a newcomer into his delicate machinery of survival motivates him to a campaign of terror. How this struggle between Francis and Anna plays out, how it transforms both of them, along with the fates of all the other residents, is the gist of Carey's tale, which becomes ultimately a lesson in how prisons of the mind are self-constructed and self-demolished.

Carey imbues his characters and settings with such a density of invention and particularity that their weird world bootstraps itself into existence. While not quite up to either Peake's or Miéville's linguistic and ideational fecundity, Carey can hold his head up high. The warped syntax and halting sentences employed by Francis add up to a genuinely innovative style.

This novel plants a mortar shell of cognitive dissonance right in the middle of the camp of hobbits, orcs, and dragons.

Accomplished as both the Searcy and Carey novels are in their individual ways, they both lack one outstanding element, and that's humor. (Although of course some of Francis Orme's more outrageous opinions and observations might draw a sad chuckle.) For that essential quality we now turn to Andrew Crumey's *Mr. Mee* (Picador, hardcover, $25.00, 344 pages, ISBN 0-312-26803-3). This is Crumey's fourth novel (from internal evidence, I suspect that his earlier *D'Alembert's Principle* [1998] might be a prequel to the current work), and his mastery of the long form stands in contrast to the occasionally baggy journeyman work of Carey and Searcy. This book is an easygoing delight to read, while still offering intellectual challenges.

Mr. Mee has three narrative lines, each thread popping up in sequence as the chapters advance. Let's take them in order of appearance.

Our initial protagonist is the title character, a quiet and retiring, eighty-six-year-old gentleman of some small means, who is a bibliophile of the first order. His housekeeper, Mrs. B, sees to all his simple earthly needs, freeing Mr. Mee to pursue his literary researches. One day, Mr. Mee becomes intrigued by a slim reference to a sect called the Xanthics. He learns that further facts about this cult will be found in Jean-Bernard Rosier's massive eighteenth-century *Encylopedia*. One problem: no one anywhere has a copy of this apocryphal book. Determined to track it down, Mr. Mee vows to become computer literate. He purchases a machine and gets online. But his Web researches lead him into a complex and laughable tangle involving lots of naked women, and two minor characters from Rosier's lifetime named Ferrand and Minard.

Our second strand bops back in time to follow the slapstick antics of this very duo. Simple—and somewhat simple-minded—copyists living in Paris, Minard and Ferrand

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unluckily take the assignment of copying Rosier's masterwork, which includes a complete explication of quantum physics (in pitch-perfect eighteenth-century vocabulary), and a proof of the nonexistence of reality, as well as some theorizing on consciousness studies that mirrors the work of Dennett, Penrose, *et al.* Their assignment quickly drags them into spying on Jean Jacques Rousseau, as that famously paranoid writer begins his own descent into madness.

The final component of the tale is the first-person narrative of a professor named Petrie. An expert on Rousseau, Minard and Ferrand (the latter two turn out to be characters from Rousseau's own writings), Dr. Petrie is undergoing his own crisis, as he seeks to bed a student and confront his own mortality.

By book's end, needless to say, all these lines of discourse implode into a fireball of meaning.

Crumey's best sections are the Mee and Ferrand and Minard portions. (The Petrie thread, while necessary and well-wrought, brings the least to the table, recalling too many tales of lust in academia.) Mr. Mee is none other, I am convinced, than our old friend, Mr. Magoo. With the same blend of confident fatuousness and optimistic bullheadedness, he wreaks havoc with every movement, but always emerges undamaged himself. Ferrand and Minard, of course, echo in their ancillary lives both Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* (1966) and Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1952), for Rosier never surfaces to reclaim his papers. Additionally, the conspiratorial aspects of this novel conjure up thoughts of Umberto Eco's *Foucault's Pendulum* (1988) though on a less daunting level of complexity.

What's really most affecting is that each thread is a love story that ends badly. Mr. Mee's epicene kind of love for the young woman named Catriona; Petrie's infatuation with Louisa, his student; and the barely concealed homosexual love of Minard and Ferrand—all these affairs come to absolute ruin.

Yet this book overall is not a sad lament, but a testament to the absurdities of history, both personal and public. You'll find wit and wisdom aplenty in Crumey's intricate braidings.

Haruki Murakami is one of those authors who employ a repertory company of actors, favorite types whom he puts through a variety of paces constrained only by his dark and fertile imagination. Among others, there's usually the conflicted young man who finds it hard to connect socially or personally. The flighty, sensitive young woman of some talents, yet unable to fit within social constraints. And the older woman of mystery, a walking enigma, potently attractive yet dangerous despite her best intentions. We saw this troupe in action most recently in *South of the Border, West of the Sun* (1998), and Murakami's newest, *Sputnik Sweetheart* (Knopf, hardcover, $23.00, 210 pages, ISBN 0-375-41169-0), equally compact and affecting, echoes its predecessor. Both books are a break for Murakami from his massive complicated masterpiece, *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* (1997), although *Border* was actually published in Japan prior to *Bird*.

Our narrator—never named except for one allusion to his Kafkaesque initial, K—is a youthful grade-school teacher recounting at some remove the story of two women: Sumire, his peer and the unrequited love of his life; and Miu, a middle-aged businesswoman. Among the three, subtle and intricate coils of emotions spin themselves. Sumire falls in love with Miu, who remains

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tragically aloof. K watches all from a distance, serving as confidante to Sumire. Until, that is, the day that Sumire vanishes on a European trip, and he must rush to Miu's side. At this point, the relentlessly mimetic, crystal-sharp novel falls under the glare of a quasar of weirdness, exposing ontological holes beneath all we had assumed solid.

Eminently readable, packed with disquisitions on art and life, this novel typifies Murakami's stance on existence: the universe is stranger than we can imagine, and even good will and compassion are barely sufficient to prevent shipwrecks of the heart and soul. Yet, as we observe in a coda after K has returned to Japan, some kind of life, however drear, can continue to be upheld amidst the wreckage, with some potential for future blessings. "From the shabby mountaintop, the ruins of those empty feelings, I could see my own life stretching into the future. It looked just like an illustration in a science fiction novel I read as a child, of the desolate surface of a deserted planet. No sign of life at all. Each day seemed to last forever, the air either boiling hot or freezing. The spaceship that had brought me here had disappeared, and I was stuck. I'd have to survive on my own." Bleak as this sentiment is, this passage occurs some forty pages from the end of the book, and what happens in that last interval will relieve the despair in miraculous, unanticipated ways.

More Laffs, Please—We're British

David Garnett returns to the cosmic, comic saga begun in *Bikini Planet* (2000) with *Space Wasters* (Orbit, mass-market, £6.99, 375 pages, ISBN 1-84149-012-1), and I'm pleased to report that all the magnificent deadpan silliness of the first book is replicated in spades, with a new layering of real Ian-Wallace-style plot twists in addition.

Our cryonic voyager from the twentieth century, Wayne Norton, having previously survived various futuristic trials, finds himself in Paradise at book's opening, married to the lovely Kiru and lazing around on the resort planet Caphmiaultrelvossmuaf. But with Kiru's inexplicable abduction, Wayne is plunged into a quest involving galactic tax inspectors, space pirates, communalistic yet militaristic aliens with a grudge against the whole universe, and a mysterious being named *******. Clad only in light-opera steward's getup, Wayne must use all his intelligence and wiles—not to mention his capacity for imbibing alien liquors—to recover his lost love. Into the stew are tossed twin news-bimbos named Candy and Mandy, three roguish brothers, one of whom is a sister, and various "aliens . . . almost as bad as humans."

Replete with hilarious scenes—such as when Wayne lands as Ambassador on the planet of the Algolans and is mistaken for a gunrunner—and rich with jazzy dialogue, this book ranks with the best of Robert Sheckley, Ron Goulart, Keith Laumer and Harry Harrison. With more SF like this, the world would be a happier place.

There's a great James M. Cain novella in which a bank embezzler, stricken by conscience, tries to put all the stolen money back into the bank, but finds that reversing the cooked books is harder than imagined. Basically, this is the same gimmick employed by the droll David Langford in his 1984 novel (now reprinted by the new firm Big Engine: PO Box 185, Abingdon, Oxon, UK OX14 1GR), *The Leaky Establishment* (trade, £7.99, 209 pages,

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ISBN 1-903468-00-0). Only Langford's crime scene is a nuclear weapons lab, and the items gone missing are warheads. The consequences and desperation are thus raised to hilarious new heights.

Roy Tappen is a scientist at the NUTC lab who hates his job, especially the security measures surrounding him. On a dare, he smuggle an innocuous piece of office equipment out of the grounds, only to discover at home that the worthless file cabinet he "stole" harbors an atomic package in one drawer. Desperate to return it, Tappen is thwarted at every step, eventually ending up with *two* cores in his possession. His eventual solution to this fix sneaks up on the reader from left field, but looks perfectly plausible in retrospect.

Langford draws his characters with sharp lines and plenty of quirkiness. His insider knowledge of the industry makes for total believability. And his joker's dialogue, sense of timing and plotting are nigh perfect. Too bad Peter Sellers isn't around to star in the film adaptation of this book: *The Leaky Establishment* is a perfect vehicle for his style of manic officiousness.

Stone Soup

Not since William Gibson's *Agrippa (A Book of the Dead)* (1992) has a piece of fiction been so tied up with its medium of reproduction as we discover in the case of Jeff VanderMeer's *The Exchange* (Hoegbotton & Sons, uncategorizable, $6.99/$20.00, unpaginated, ISBN unavailable). The deluxe edition of this work arrives in an attractive black box containing: 1) an Appogiatura sheet explaining the premise; 2) a candle; 3) some dried mushrooms; 4) a cover letter from the publishers in an envelope; 5) an emergency ID capsule; and 6) the story chapbook itself inside another envelope. The whole package purports to be a souvenir of the famous Festival of the Freshwater Squid, a holiday celebrated in VanderMeer's notable fictional city of Ambergris. The text of "The Exchange" is a neat little mordant thriller, illustrated with subtle flourishes by Eric Schaller. Buttressed by the packaging, the whole affair carries whimsy to new heights of invention, and is surely destined to be the most desirable collectible literary oddity of the new century.

Every Sunday I anticipate Ted Rall's editorial cartoons that I find reprinted in the *New York Times*. Rall's dry, sardonic wit and shamblolic/obsessive drawing style combine to deliver a unique dose of satire consistently. His one-shot cartoons are often mini-narratives, and so it's no surprise that his newest book, *2024* (NBM, hardcover, $15.95, 96 pages, ISBN 1-56163-279-1), manages to sustain a single story, however fractured, at graphic-novel length. A reworking of Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), this book zeroes in on our civilization's "neopostmodern" twenty-first-century malaise with frightening exactitude. Here, Winston and Julia are sensation-seeking management types with every sense and whim surfeited, in a sly reversal of Orwell's drab totalitarian state. Everything is true, and nothing matters for these rebels with a golden-parachute clause. Yet Rall's and Orwell's dystopias are cousins under the skin, proving that excess and deprivation alike can kill the soul. Like all Swiftian satire, Rall's hyperbole coats with laughter the bitter pill at the center. "Assumptions permit imagination. Knowledge is impossible. Exploitation is benevolence." Shudder as you laugh.

Jonathan Lethem's goofy, bracing allegory, *This Shape We're In* (Mc-

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Sweeney's Books, hardcover, $9.00, 55 pages, ISBN 0-9703355-2-0), takes off from George Chappell's classic *Through the Alimentary Canal with Gun and Camera* (1930), wherein a party of microscopic humans plumbs the innards of some hapless victim. Or perhaps the humans are normal-sized and the victim is gigantic? This enigma is never fully resolved in either Chappell or Lethem, and provides some of the frisson of both books. Lethem's text mingles suburban propriety with physiological exigencies to produce a dissonance that undercuts all models of reality until the volume's paradigm-shattering conclusion. Our protagonist, Henry Farbur, is a kind of jaded, burnt-out Man-in-the-Gray-Flannel-Suit who eventually finds his true destiny despite willful ignorance. Short, punchy, and jam-packed with pop references, this novella ranks up there with the sight of Woody Allen in a sperm-suit.

The popularity of audio books is higher than ever, so a spoken-word "magazine" or anthology seems a natural winner. The folks at Frequency Publishing (Jaq Greenspon and Jeremy Bloom) have made a fine start at such a venture with their bimonthly *Frequency,* whose policy is to mix new works with reprints. Volume One (CD, $9.95, 62:34, ISBN unavailable) contains five entertaining stories by familiar names (Ray Vukcevich, Stanley Schmidt, Stephen Dedman) and by newcomers (Kurt Roth, John Serna). Volume 2 (CD, $9.95, 72:11, ISBN 0-9707056-0-3) holds six stories, from Bruce Holland Rogers, Jerry Oltion, Dedman, Cory Doctorow, John B. Rosenman, and Bud Sparhawk. Plainly, the listener is getting his money's worth in sheer quantity. The stories themselves are all nicely wrought, and range from pure fantasy (Rogers's "Apple Golem") to hard SF (Schmidt's "Panic" and on to cyberpunk (Doctorow's "Abbat01r"). As for the voice-actors, they mostly eschew dialects and characterization for straight-ahead sonorous readings, which, however, taken at length, tend to blur into a kind of Garrison Keillor monotone. Not grating, but not stirring either. Only two tales are narrated by women, and additional casting of female voices might further enliven this quite respectable new zine for the ears.

An imposter walks among us, and his name is Scott Edelman. For years now, the field has known him only as an editor of much perspicacity, whose story choices crop up regularly on award-ballots. But beneath his editor's mask, Edleman is at heart a fiction writer, as his masterful collection *These Words Are Haunted* (Wildside, hardcover, $37.95, 194 pages, ISBN 1-58715-290-8) will now and forever prove. These are horror stories, yes, but of the sort that such subtle peers as Dennis Etchison excel in: intellectually creepy, not slasher savage. A metafictional exercise such as "Ten Things I've Learned About Writing" upsets the very foundation stones of narrative to make its point, for instance. Edelman has a sharp sense of humor, too, and the balance between laughter and shudders is captured perfectly in "A Plague on Both Your Houses," wherein zombies in regal finery enact Shakespearean dilemmas. This is an essential collection from a multitalented adept.

Perhaps you recall me praising the drawings provided by Eric Shanower for Edward Einhorn's *Paradox in Ox* (1999). Well, those vignettes, wonderful as they were, have now been trumped by several orders of magnitude with Shanower's own book, *Age of Bronze, Volume One: A Thousand Ships* (Image Comics, hardcover, $29.95, 223 pages, ISBN 1-58240-221-3). This is the opening trumpet blast in

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Shanower's B&W graphic novel version of the entire Trojan War, and the quality of both the storytelling and the artwork is unsurpassed. Comparisons to Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (1991) spring immediately to mind (though there are no transformations of humans into other animals for narrative purposes here, just a fastidious realism). This must be one of the few "comics" in existence to features a nine-page bibliography, and the amount of thought and research Shanower has invested in this project (whose origin and development he tracks in an informative Afterword) is reflected in the high quality of the product. Shanower's people, in both appearance and mentality, are true creatures of their age, defiantly nonmodern in their actions and thoughts. Yet an eternal human air of "love, lust, death, sense of self, and the individual's relationship to the world" render them as familiar as your neighbors. Through beautiful landscapes these instantly individual men and women pursue their mortal fates (the gods remain offstage in Shanower's conception of the saga), mingling low and high elements in their lives. This volume collects issues one through nine of the original comic, which is continuing the story in regular installments even as I type. What are you waiting for? Permission from the Oracle at Delphi?

Since 1962, the dedicated and keen-witted Ed Meskys has been publishing his zine *Niekas* in one form or another, until today his vast experience allows him to produce an impressive publication of general interest to all SF readers, as well as a line of booklets on individual topics, all with the aid of stalwart helpers such as Fred Lerner and Anne Braude. Issue Number 46 of *Niekas* (64 pages, $4.95, ISSN unavailable) offers a concentration on "strange sports stories," wherein various critics examine such books as Michael Bishop's *Brittle Innings* (1994). A wealth of other features include Fay Nelson's autobiographical essay, "On Liking Clark Ashton Smith," and Ben Indick's account of an unfortunate, half-comedic feud he conducted with Sam Moskowitz.

Those wishing to hear Moskowitz's own inimitable voice, sadly missing since his death, should pick up the fascinating *After All These Years . . .* (Niekas, chapbook, $5.95, 96 pages, ISBN 0-910619-07-7). Here, Moskowitz responds at length to eighteen questions by Jeffrey Elliot, sharing numerous anecdotes from his long love affair with SF. Three other Niekas offerings focus on individual authors. *Andre Norton: Fables and Futures* (chapbook, $5.95, 52 pages, ISBN 0-910619-4-2) dips several critical toes into the vast pool of material Norton has gifted us with over her long career. I particularly enjoyed Don D'Ammassa's "The Haunted Library," which attempts to fathom exactly what makes Norton's books resonate so strongly with young readers. In *A Silverlock Companion* (chapbook, $7.95, 52 pages, ISBN 0-910619-02-6), the career of John Myers Myers is addressed, with an emphasis on annotating the riddles in his classic fantasy novel alluded to above. And James Anderson offers us a convincing structuralist reading of several stories from Bradbury's *The Illustrated Man* (1951) in his *The Illustrated Bradbury* (chapbook, $5.95, 56 pages, ISBN 0-910619-06-9). Finally, much credit is due illustrator Larry Dickison, whose elegant B&W drawings illuminate many of these titles.

Valuable insights into the life and work of another famous writer can be gained from reading *The Dark Barbarian: The Writings of Robert E. Howard: A Critical Anthology* (Wildside, trade, $19.95, 242 pages,

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ISBN 1-58715-203-7), a collection of eight essays by various hands, all brilliantly assembled by editor Don Herron, along with superior supporting apparatus of index, bibliography, and informative appendices. This volume, originally issued in 1984 but long out of print, surveys REH's poetry, his dealings with editors, his attitude toward the supernatural, his fascination with his native Southwest, and a score of other topics with massed perception, knowledge and wisdom. Just hearing the voice of the much-missed Fritz Leiber once again is worth the price of this hefty book.

Mythic Delirium (DNA Publications, chapbook, $5.00, 30 pages, ISSN 1529-3726) is a magazine devoted to fantastical poetry. How rare and exciting a statement that is! In Issue Number 4, editor Mike Allen presents some impressive verses that survey galaxies of meaning and emotion. You'll enjoy Gary Every's "Mamlambo" for its humor, Jack Fisher and Wendy Rathbone's "Back to October" for its autumnal creepiness, and Carma Park's "The Dreaming" for its aboriginal purity, as well as fourteen others.

Elsewhere on the poetry front, we are at last treated to Bruce Boston's *The Complete Accursed Wives* (Dark Regions/Talisman, trade, $9.95, 98 pages, ISBN 1-888993-19-7). Readers of this magazine, where many selections from this book first appeared, need to know that they probably have not yet seen all these witty poems and stories, since over a dozen other sources are listed on the credits page. En masse, Boston's humorous, inventive, heart-tugging excursions into surreal feminism appear even more impressive than when encountered separately. Employing a number of metrical and narrative strategies, Boston penetrates to the depth of what makes any marriage, however weird, really function. And from Niekas comes *Obsessions* (chapbook, $3.95, 40 pages, ISBN 0-910619-05-0), wherein the whimsical Anthony Magistrale shares in sparkling verse such revelations as what monsters lurked in the basement of Herman Melville's house, and how King Kong reacted to being jilted by his human paramour.

What's the next best thing to having been one of Phil Dick's bosom buddies, privileged to share his wild raps over a bottle of zinfandel? Maybe reading *What If Our World Is Their Heaven?* (Overlook, hardcover, $26.95, 204 pages, ISBN 1-58567-009-X). Compiled by Gwen Lee and Doris Elaine Sauter from taped interviews conducted just two months before Dick's untimely death, these transcripts reveal a gonzo mind in love with speculation, eager to chase down every nuance of thought and share the results, however wacky, with others. The core of this book is Dick's verbal unfolding of what would have been his next novel, *The Owl in Daylight*. The extemporized synopsis of this novel about music, mathematics, and religion reveals once again what a hole Dick's passing left.

I encountered the writing of Paul Krassner thirty years ago, and my life has never been the same. Satirist and social commentator of a high order, ur-Yippie and pal to Lenny Bruce and John Lennon, Krassner was one of the writers who showed me what humor and parody could really accomplish. Not content to rest on his laurels during the last two decades, Krassner accumulated a large body of primo essays now collected in *Sex, Drugs and the Twinkie Murders* (Loompanics, trade, $19.95, 362 pages, ISBN 1-55950-206-1) In cases like "Further Weirdness with Terence McKenna," science-fictional tropes intersect everyday craziness to stimulating effect.

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Another unclassifiable item to cross my desk this time around is the audio rendition of Lovecraft's own poetry, *Fungi from Yuggoth* (Fedogan & Bremer, CD, $15.00, 65:33, ISBN 1-878252-50-X [Composer's Mix] or 1-878252-51-8 [Director's Mix]). Packaged in a sturdy vinyl case complete with informative booklet, this production was helmed by director Lawrence Russo. The ethereal, evocative synthesized music—alternately restrained and wild—was composed and performed by Mike Olson. And reading the eldritch sonnets, in a voice that lulls, thrills, frightens, and seduces, is accomplished actor John Arthur. Together, using a minimum of special effects, these three men manage to bring out the best in Lovecraft's creepy poems, wringing horror and black irony from every deliberately crafted line. This CD is a fine example of transposing work from one medium to another with gains all around.

A second audio offering comes from GNP Crescendo, the masters of SF music. *Farscape: Music from the Original Soundtrack* (CD, $12.98, 69:00, GNPD8068), represents the work of composer Guy Gross and Australian techno artists SubVision, a trio of brothers, Chris, Toby, and Braedy Neal. Their twenty-three tracks from Seasons One and Two of the television series stand amazingly well on their own, without visual referents. The music blends Middle Eastern and jazz influences into hypnotic tapestries that menace and enchant, veering from the aggressive to the sublime. The perfect accompaniment to an hour of hypnogogic reveries.

Dean Cornwell was once a name known in every literate household. An uncommonly gifted artist with a palette of sun-drenched hues, who thought of himself as an inheritor to Howard Pyle's style, Cornwell provided hundreds of gorgeous illustrations to accompany magazine fiction in the twenties, thirties and onward, before turning to the production of murals, the calling he felt to be his true mistress. Additionally, he invested his talents in some uncommonly beautiful advertisements for a variety of firms. Cornwell's biographical history and a treasure-trove of his artwork, in brilliant color or b&w, can be found in *Dean Cornwell: Dean of Illustrators* (Collectors Press, hardcover, $75.00, 239 pages, ISBN 1-888054-43-3), assembled by Patricia Janis Broder. Although Cornwell never seemed to connect with authors of fantasy or SF, many of his paintings—especially those dealing with the Orient or the Middle East—evoke Barsoom or Opar. And his series involving that dread pirate, Captain Blood, surely count as fantastical in nature. To get an idea of Cornwell's genius, consider "The Dice Game." The majority of the painting is filled with gleeful, tactilely rendered centurions tossing dice. Only on close inspection does one notice the humble, evocative feet of the crucified Jesus hanging down from the upper edge of the canvas. A lesser artist would have placed the Crucifixion center stage and milked it for pathos. But Cornwell's version attains more drama by simple omission, the sign of a true genius. And, as usual with Collectors Press, this finely produced and oversized book represents real value for your money.

One more gem from Collectors Press: David Delamare's *Animerotics: A Forbidden Cabaret* (trade, $24.95, 64 pages, ISBN 1-888054-51-4). This unique mix of whimsical prose and arresting visuals opens with a charming narrative about a rich Edwardian eccentric named Alphonse Zukor, whose lifelong fixation was to stage twenty-six living dioramas involving naked women

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and animals, all in service of the mighty mysteries of the alphabet. The gorgeous sepia images presented here are the supposed postcards heralding each show, and they blend the eroticism of Olivia's work with the surreal juxtapositions of the Dillons. My favorite: "V" is for vampire bat. Visit www.animerotics. com to see this sexy maiden of the night.

I had more fun with *Frost* (Fedogan & Bremer, hardcover, $29.00, 306 pages, ISBN 1-878252-42-9), by Donald Wandrei, than with many a contemporary mystery novel. These eight stories (another volume containing the final ten in the series is slated to follow soon) appeared in 1934-35 in the pages of a pulp named *Clues*, and concern the scientific detective named I.V. Frost and his beautiful partner, Jean Moray. Frost is a combination of James Bond, Doctor Strange, and Sherlock Holmes, prone to smoke marijuana incessantly throughout each case. And what cases! Wandrei first thought up the most bizarre crimes imaginable, featuring the weirdest perps, then decided to recount each mystery in a unique fashion that would keep the reader hooked. You get to witness or hear of a series of oddball events without knowing the underlying chain of causation until Frost displays the links at the end. The result is entrancing, and moves along at a slam-bang pace. I defy anyone to read, say, "Green Man—Creeping," with its crawling corpse, or "Bride of the Rats," with its Bluebeard's dungeon full of skeletal women, and not be hypnotized till the end. This book is a great companion to Wandrei's SF and Fantasy volumes already published by F&B.

On display in *Claremont Tales* (Golden Gryphon, hardcover, $23.95, 290 pages, ISBN 1-930846-00-2) are all the many facets of the talented Richard Lupoff. Whether treating us to SF-mystery hybrids like "Black Mist," to pure fantasies like "The Tootsie Roll Factor," or to HPL-inspired outings like "Discovery of the Ghooric Zone" and "Documents in the Case of Elizabeth Akely," Lupoff exhibits an unwavering mastery of material and tone. Unafraid to veer from silly to somber, he invests in each tale a full amount of dedication and ambition. "At Vega's Taqueria" is the best adrift-in-the-multiverse story I can think of, accomplishing in a compact space what other writers might do in a novel. And as usual, this Golden Gryphon volume is a well-produced artifact in its own right, with a great wraparound cover by Nicholas Jainschigg.

Splatterpunk is alive and festering in *Nasty Snips* (MT Publishing, trade, $11.99, 158 pages, ISBN 0-9536833-0-3), edited by Christopher Teague. I'll confess to finding these thematically linked stories about dreadful fatalities, supernatural or otherwise, a tad wearisome in bulk. But two old favorite authors of mine —Gerald Daniel Houarner and Mark McLaughlin—stepped in to provide sophisticated relief, the former with "Boxes and Bags," about the strange contents of various vessels, and the latter with "The Meltdown Mix," concerning a deadly song. Take this volume in small non-fatal doses.

Similarly afflicted with brain-splatterings and limb-rendings to the point of overkill is *The Dead Inn* (Delirium Books, hardcover, $25.00, 232 pages, ISBN 1-929653-12-3). Editor Shane Ryan Staley—whose frame tale about haunted lodgings really is underutilized by the participants—assembles twenty-five stories imbrued with grue, but all rather unsurprising in their morbid denouements. In this setting, a relatively restrained and subtle piece like Scott Thomas's "Summer Gargoyles," concerning a woman's voyeurism, stands out as a landmark of real spookiness.

Two anthologies now with a focus

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on the erotic. From the engagingly named Soft Skull Press comes *What the Fuck: The Avant-Porn Anthology* (trade, $14.00, 220 pages, ISBN 1-887128-61-1). Edited by Michael Hemmingson, with an introduction by co-conspirator Larry McCaffery, this book mixes a few reprints with many original contributions from such adroit and agile dirty-postcard purveyors as Don Webb, Thom Metzger, William Vollmann, and Robert Coover. These stories intend to shock more than arouse, and mostly succeed, especially the ones that focus on violence as a turn-on. The most appealing to my taste, however, was Vivienne Wood's "DTD," which makes telling and humorous commentaries on society by riffing on the notion of a woman awaking to find herself possessed of male genitalia in place of her own. Meanwhile, over at Circlet Press, editor Cecilia Tan pursues a more conventionally sensual agenda with *A Taste of Midnight* (trade, $14.95, 174 pages, ISBN 1-885865-23-6). The eleven stories here all revolve around vampirism of one sort or another, with an emphasis on untraditional, nonRice-ian parasites. The level of writing and invention in this volume is uncommonly high, but the best (and no doubt deliberately the longest) story here is Renée Charles's over-the-top "Initiation into *Club Sanguis*." Strippers and odd mystical potions, lesbians and shape-changing—it all works for me!

Editor James Lowder presents sixteen sad views of The Matter of Britain in *The Doom of Camelot* (Green Knight Publishing, trade, $14.95, 319 pages, ISBN 1-928999-09-3). As you might guess from the title of this collection, all the stories concern themselves with the sunset years of Arthur's kingdom, when all the high hopes have crashed on the rocks of treachery and human frailty. Many of the stories hew closely to the canon, while others—notably Douglas Clark's "The Knight Who Wasn't There"—take revisionist tacks. Phyllis Ann Karr's "The Realm of the Dead and Dreaming," with its focus on an undead Merlin, is particularly affecting. All in all, a solemn but enjoyable threnody. ❍

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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

Let's look past the holiday lull, to some of the conventions early next year. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of con(vention)s, a sample of SF folksongs, info on fanzines and clubs, and how to get a later, longer list of cons, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 10 Hill #22-L, Newark NJ 07102. The hot line is (973) 242-5999. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months out. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard.—Erwin S. Strauss

DECEMBER 2001

28–30—**EveCon.** For info, write: **1607 Thomas Rd., Friendly MD 20744.** Or phone: **(301) 292-5231** (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). **(Web) www.fantek.org.** Con will be held in: Reston VA, near Washington DC (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Sheraton. Guests will include: none planned.

JANUARY2002

4–6—**Trek Celebration, 11916 W. 109 #125, Overland Pk. KS 66210. (913) 327-8735.** Sheraton, Secaucus NJ.

5–6—**Creation, 100 W. Broadway #1200, Glendale CA 91210. (818) 409-0960.** Marriott, Brooklyn NY. Media con.

11–13—**MarsCon, Box 8143, Yorktown VA 23693. www.marscon.net.** Ramada, Williamsburg VA. Relax-a-con.

11–13—**RustyCon, Box 84291, Seattle WA 98124. www.rustycon.com.** Doubletree, Bellevue WA. E. Mitchell.

11–13—**GAFilk, 3630 Salem Dr., Lithonia GA 30038. www.gafilk.org.** Clarion Airport. S., Atlanta GA. Filksinging.

18–20—**Arisia, Bldg.600, #322, 1 Kendall Sq., Cambridge MA 02139. www.arisia.org.** Park Plaza, Boston MA.

18–20—**ConFusion, Box 8284, Ann Arbor MI 48107. www.stilyagi.org.** Van Dyke Park Suites, Warren MI.

18–20—**GeneriCon, c/o RPI Union, 110 8th, Troy NY 12180. www.genericon.org.** Great Hall, Darrin Ctr., RPI.

18–20—**OhayoCon, Box 25718, Garfield Hts. OH 44125. www.ohayocon.com.** Cleveland OH. D. Melendrez. Anime.

18–20—**Write(C)on, 12 Flinders, Matraville NSW, Australia. e.harvey@unsw.edu.au.** Barker, Kensington NSW.

18–23—**American Library Assn., 50 E. Huron, Chicago IL 60611. (800) 545-2433.** New Orleans LA. Book trade only.

24–27—**FURther ConFusion, 105 Serra Way #236, Milpitas CA 95035. www.furtherconfusion.org.** San Mateo CA.

25–27—**ChattaCon, Box 23908, Chattanooga TN 37422. (423) 842-7130.** Clarion. Rawn, J. R. Daniels, McDevitt.

25–27—**VeriCon, HRSFA, c/o 4 Univ. Hall, Cambridge MA 02138. www.vericon.org.** Sever Hall, Harvard Univ.

FEBRUARY 2002

1–3—**UshiCon, Box 40937, Austin TX 78704. www.ushicon.com.** Sheraton Four Points. Weaver, Lewis. Anime.

2–3—**Creation, 100 W. Broadway #1200, Glendale CA 91210. (818) 409-0960.** Convention Ctr., Sacramento CA.

7–10—**CapriCon, Box 60085, Chicago IL 60660. www.capricon.org.** Sheraton, Arlington Hgts. IL. Dr. Demento.

8–10—**FarPoint, 6099 Hunt Club Rd., Elkridge MD 21075. farpoint@bigfoot.com.** Hunt Valley (MD) Inn. Star Trek.

8–10—**Starfleet Ball, 6 The Street, Sutton Waldron DT11 8NX, UK. (01747) 812-353.** Carrington, Bournemouth.

9–10—**Trek Celebration, 11916 W. 109 #125, Overland Pk. KS 66210. (913) 327-8735.** Chancellor, Champaign IL.

15–17—**Boskone, Box 809, Framingham MA 01701. (617) 625-6311.** Sheraton, Framingham MA. Neil Gaiman.

15–17—**SheVaCon, Box 416, Verona VA 24482. 540248-4152.** Holiday Inn Tanglewood, Roanoke VA. D. Drake.

15–17—**RadCon, 2527 W. Kennewick Av. #162, Kennewick WA 99336. www.radcon.yi.org.** Doubletree, Pasco WA.

15–17—**KatsuCon, Box 222691, Chantilly VA 20153. www.katsucon.com.** Marriott W'front, Baltimore MD. Anime.

AUGUST 2002

29–Sep. 2—**ConJose, Box 61363, Sunnyvale CA 94088. www.conjose.org.** San Jose CA. The WorldCon. $160.

AUGUST 2003

28–Sep. 1—**TorCon 3, Box 3, Stn. A, Toronto ON M5W 1A2. www.torcon3.on.ca.** The WorldCon. C$200/US$135.

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NEXT ISSUE

MARCH COVER STORY

Popular and prolific British author **Ian Watson**, one of the genre's premiere "Idea Men," returns after too long an absence with our March cover story, an evocative, colorful, fast-paced novella that takes a rather shifty adventurer to one of the strangest worlds in recent science fiction, a planet covered with a living "ocean" of wood, where he finds that even in order to survive, let alone to prosper as he—and his very insistent creditors—would like, he must assume the desperately dangerous and literally world-shaking role of "A Speaker for the Wooden Sea." This is a hugely entertaining tale, full of vivid adventure, sly humor, and wildly imaginative conceptualization, and believe me, it's one you won't want to miss!

OTHER TOP-FLIGHT WRITERS

Multiple Nebula and Hugo Award-winner **Ursula K. Le Guin**, one of the true giants of our field, returns with a harrowing and yet somberly lyrical look at some of the unexpected consequences of slavery, in the moving story of "The Wild Girls"; popular British writer **Paul McAuley** takes us along with a crew salvaging spaceships in the aftermath of an interstellar war who run into some life-or-death problems that they never expected to face, as they encounter "The Passenger"; hot new writer **Jim Grimsley** plunges us deep into a strange far future and introduces us to a *most* unusual protagonist, one whose primary function in life is "Getting the News"; **R. Neube** explores what it's like to be an interplanetary refugee, painting an unsettling portrait of "Life in the Sardine Lane"; and new writer **Matthew Jarpe** delivers a sharp, satiric, and wildly imaginative vision of the future of Capitalism, in "Captains of Industry."

EXCITING FEATURES

Robert Silverberg's "Reflections" column warns us about "Burning Science at the Stake"; and **Norman Spinrad's** "On Books" column discusses "The Right (and Wrong) Stuff"; plus an array of cartoons, poems, and other features. Look for our March issue on sale at your newsstand on January 22, 2002, or subscribe today (you can also subscribe online, at our *Asimov's* website, *www.asimovs.com*) And with the holidays almost upon us, don't forget that a gift subscription to *Asimov's* makes a **great** Christmas present!

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great new stories by **R. Garcia y Robertson, Nancy Kress, Michael Swanwick, Allen Steele, Eleanor Arnason, Ian R. MacLeod, Kage Baker, Stephen Baxter, Robert Reed, Brian Stableford, Liz Williams, Paul McAuley, Charles Stross, Tom Purdom, William Sanders, Charles Sheffield**, and many others!

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